

**"CHARLOTTE
LÖWENSKÖLD,"**

BY SELMA LAGERLÖF

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BY
SELMA LAGERLÖF



TRANSLATED FROM THE SWEDISH
BY
VELMA SWANSTON HOWARD

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CHARLOTTE LÖWENSKÖLD

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CHAPTER I

THE BARONESS

BEATA EKENSTEDT, born Löwensköld and baroness, was the quintessence of culture and refinement, highly accomplished and delightfully agreeable. She could write verse quite as amusing as Fru Lenngren's.^[1]

Though short of stature, she had a good bearing, like all the Löwenskölds, and an interesting face. She said charming things to everyone, and those who had once seen her never forgot her. She had exquisite taste in dress, and her hair was always beautifully arranged. Wherever she appeared, hers was the prettiest brooch, hers the choicest bracelet, hers the most dazzling ring. She had a neat little foot, and, whether it was the fashion or not, she always wore dainty high-heeled shoes of gold brocade.

She lived in the finest house in Karlstad, and it was not wedged in among the jumble of dwellings on a narrow street. Her house stood apart on the shore of the Daläven, and the Baroness from the window of her little cabinet could look right down into the shining river. She used to tell how on clear moonlit nights she had seen the Neckan sitting beneath her window, playing on a golden harp. And no one doubted it. Why should not the River-god, like so many others, serenade the Baroness Ekenstedt?

All the notables who visited Karlstad paid their respects to the Baroness. They were immediately captivated, and thought it a pity that so adorable a lady should be buried in a small city.

It was said that Bishop Tegnér had written a sonnet to her and that the Crown Prince had declared she had the charm of a Frenchwoman. Even General von Essen, among others of the Court of Gustavus III, had to concede that such perfect dinners as were given by the Baroness Ekenstedt he had never sat down to elsewhere—either as to the viands, the service, or the conversation.

The Baroness had two daughters, Eve and Jaquette. They were pretty and amiable girls who would have been admired almost anywhere. But in Karlstad no one even noticed them; they were completely overshadowed by their mother.

When the girls attended a ball, the young gentlemen all vied with each other for the privilege of dancing with the Baroness, while Eve and Jaquette had to sit as wallflowers. As already mentioned, it was not the Neckan alone who gave serenades outside the Ekenstedt house! But no one ever sang beneath the daughters' windows. Young poets composed madrigals to B. E., but never a strophe to E. E. or J. E. Persons a bit maliciously inclined said that a young lieutenant who had courted little Eve Ekenstedt was coolly dismissed because the Baroness thought he had shown poor taste.

The lady had also a husband. Colonel Ekenstedt was a splendid fellow who would have commanded respect and admiration in any society outside his wife's world. But when seen beside his brilliant spouse, with her lively wit and playful vivaciousness, the Colonel looked like a staid country squire. When he spoke, the guests in his home

scarcely listened; it was almost as if he were not there at all. It cannot be said of the Colonel's wife that she allowed those who swarmed about her any familiarities. Her conduct was unimpeachable. But it never occurred to her mind to draw her husband out of the shadow. She probably thought it suited him best to remain somewhat in the background.

This charming Baroness, this much-fêted lady, had not only a husband and two daughters, she had also a son. The son she adored. He was pushed forward on all occasions. It would not have done for any guest of the Ekenstedt house to overlook or slight him—not if he entertained any hope of being invited there again.

The Baroness, however, had reason to be proud of her son. Karl Arthur was a talented youth with lovable ways and attractive exterior; he had delicate features and large dark eyes. He was not, as other spoiled children, forward and brazen. As a schoolboy, he had never played truant, had never “put up any game” on his teachers. He was of a more romantic turn of mind than either of his sisters. Before his eighth year he had made up neat little rhymes. And he could tell mamma that he too had heard the Neckan play and seen the brownies dance on the meadows of Voxnäs. In fact, in every way, he was his mother's own son.

He filled her heart completely. Yet she could hardly be called a weak mother. At least Karl Arthur had to learn to work. True, his mother held him as something higher than all other beings; and for that very reason it would not have done for him to come home from the *gymnasium* with anything short of the highest marks. While Karl attended class, the Baroness never invited any of his instructors to the house. No, it should not be said that he received high marks because he was the son of the Baroness Ekenstedt, who gave such fine dinners. Ah, yes, the Baroness had quality!

Karl Arthur was graduated from the Karlstad *Gymnasium* with highest honours, as was Eric Gustaf Geijer^[2] in his day; and to matriculate at Upsala University was just play for him, as it had been for Geijer. The Baroness had seen the tubby little professor many a time, and had had him as table companion. A markedly gifted man, to be sure; still, she could but think that her Karl Arthur had quite as good a mind; that some day he, too, would be a famous professor who would draw to his lectures Crown Prince Oscar, Governor Järta,^[3] Fru Silverstolpe^[4], and all the other notables at Upsala.

Karl Arthur entered the University at the autumn semester, year 1826. All that term, and in fact throughout his college years, he wrote home regularly once a week. Not one of his precious letters was destroyed; his mother kept them all, reading them over again and again. At the Sunday dinners, when the relatives gathered round the board, she would read to them his latest epistle. This she could do with good grace, for these were letters she might well be proud of.

The Baroness surmised that the relatives expected Karl Arthur to be a paragon of all the virtues now that he was on his own, so to speak; and it was a triumph for her to be able to read out to them how he had taken inexpensive lodgings, did his own marketing, and prepared his simple meals; how he arose at five every morning and worked twelve hours a day. Then, too, there were the many deferential terms employed in his letters, and the fulsome praises bestowed upon his mother. The Baroness quite gratuitously imparted to Provost Sjöberg, who had married an Ekenstedt, and Alderman Ekenstedt,

uncle of her husband, and the cousins Stake, who lived in the great house on the square, that Karl Arthur, though now out in the world, still maintained that his mother might have been a poet of the first rank had she not lived solely for her husband and children. Ah, no, she had sought no reward; it had been a voluntary sacrifice. Accustomed as she was to laudation of every sort, her eyes always filled when she read these lines from her darling boy.

But her greatest triumph came just before Christmas, when Karl Arthur wrote that he had not used up all the money his father had given him for his expenses at Upsala, that he still had about half of it left to come home with.

This was most astounding news to the Provost, the Alderman, and the most distant of the cousins Stake. Such a thing, they averred, had never happened before and surely would never happen again. They all agreed that Karl Arthur was a wonder.

It was lonely for the poor Baroness with her boy away at college the greater part of the year; but she had so much joy of his letters she hardly could have wished it to be otherwise. When he had attended a lecture by the famous neo-romantic poet, Atterbom, he would discourse so interestingly on philosophy and poetry. And when such letters came, the Baroness would sit dreaming for hours of the wonderful things her Karl Arthur was going to do. She believed he would outrank even Professor Geijer. Perhaps he might be as great a man as Karl von Linné, and as world-renowned. Or, why not a great poet?—A second Tégner? Ah, what more delightful entertainment than to revel in one's thoughts!

Karl Arthur always came home for the Christmas and summer holidays; and every time his mother saw him again, she thought he had grown more handsome and manly. In other respects, he had not changed. He showed the old worshipful attitude toward his mother, the usual respect for his father, and teasing, playful way with his sisters.

Sometimes the Baroness felt a trifle impatient, as Karl Arthur, year after year, remained quietly at Upsala, and nothing much happened. Her friends all explained, that since Karl Arthur was to take his Master's examination it would be some time before he was through. She must consider what it meant to pass in all the subjects studied at the University—in astronomy, Hebrew, geometry, and the rest. He couldn't "get by" with less. The Baroness thought it a cruel examination, and so it was; but it couldn't be changed just for the sake of Karl Arthur.

In the late autumn of 1829, when Karl Arthur was in his seventh term at Upsala, he wrote home, to his mother's delight, that he had presented himself for the examination in Latin, which, though not a hard one, was prerequisite to the finals.

Karl Arthur made no to-do of the thing, but only said it would be nice to be through with it. He had never had any difficulty with his Latin; so he had reason to think that all would go well. He also said that this was the last letter his dear parents would receive from him that term. As soon as he knew the result of the examination, he would leave for home. Without doubt, on the last day of November, he would embrace his parents and his sisters.

No, Karl Arthur had not made any "noise" whatever about his Latin "exam." And he was glad afterward, for he failed lamentably. The Upsala dons had permitted

themselves to “pluck” him, although he had taken highest honours in all his studies at the Karlstad *Gymnasium*!

He was more surprised than humiliated. He could not see but that his use of the Latin language was quite defensible. To come home as one beaten was certainly exasperating; but undoubtedly his parents—or his mother, at least—would understand that it must have been due to malice of some sort. The Upsala dons wished perhaps to show that they had higher standards than the Karlstad masters, or they may have thought, because he had not elected to take part in any of the seminars, that he had been too sure of himself.

It was several days’ journey from Upsala to Karlstad, and when Karl Arthur drove in through the eastern tollgate at dusk on the thirtieth of November, he had forgotten the whole wretched affair. He was quite pleased with himself for arriving on the very day he had set in his letter. He pictured his mother standing at the salon window watching for him, and his sisters laying the coffee table.

Driving through the narrow, crooked streets of the city, he was in fine spirits, till he glimpsed in the distance the Ekenstedt home. What in the world was going on there? The whole house was lit up like a church on a Christmas morning. Sledges full of fur-clad people skimmed past him—all apparently bound for his home.

“Mother must be giving a party,” he thought with some vexation; for he was tired after his hard journey and wanted to rest. Now he’d have to change his clothes and sit gabbing with the guests until midnight.

Then, all at once, he became uneasy. Perhaps his mother was giving the party for him, to celebrate his Latin triumph.

He ordered the postboy to drive round to the kitchen entrance, and got out there so as to avoid meeting the guests. His mother was immediately notified of his arrival and requested to come to the housekeeper’s room to speak with Karl Arthur.

The Baroness had been on pins and needles lest he should not arrive in time for dinner. She was overjoyed, and came hurrying out to welcome him.

Karl Arthur met his mother with a stern face. He did not notice her outstretched hands and made no move to greet her.

“What have you been up to, Mother?” he asked abruptly. “Why is the whole city invited here to-night?” This time there was no talk of “tender parents,” and Karl Arthur seemed anything but glad to see his mother.

“Well,” said the Baroness, “I thought we ought to celebrate a little now that you have passed that dreadful examination.”

“I suppose it never occurred to you that I might be plucked,” said Karl Arthur; “but such is the case, at all events.”

The Baroness stood dumbfounded. That her son would let himself be beaten had never entered her mind.

“Oh, that in itself is of no significance,” Karl Arthur continued; “but now the whole town will know of it. I dare say all these people have been invited here to celebrate my success.”

The Baroness was utterly crestfallen. She knew the way of the Karlstaders: They no doubt thought diligence and economy admirable things in a student, but these were not enough. They looked for prize awards from the Swedish Academy and brilliant disputations that would make all the old professors turn pale under their beards. They expected clever improvisations at the national festivals and entrée to exclusive literary circles—to Professor Geijer’s, or Governor von Kraemer’s, or Fru Silverstolpe’s. Such things they could appreciate. But thus far Karl Arthur had shown no evidence of having any extraordinary gifts. His mother knew that people thought him lacking in such. And now, when at last he had proved his scholarship, she had felt there would be no harm in making a little ado over it. But this, that Karl Arthur had failed, seemed unbelievable.

“No one really knows anything for certain,” she said; “no one but the home folk. The others have only been told they were to have a pleasant surprise.”

“Then you will have to invent some pleasant surprise for them,” Karl Arthur retorted. “I’m going up to my room and shall not be down to the dinner. Not that I think the Karlstaders will take my failure to heart, but I don’t want their commiseration.”

“What in the world shall I do?” wailed the Baroness.

“That’s for you to decide,” Karl Arthur rapped out. “I’m going upstairs now. The guests need not know that I am at home.”

But this was too painful! The Baroness, then, was to sit at table and play the amiable hostess with her son up in his room, unhappy and out of temper. She was not to have the pleasure of his company. It was hard on the poor Baroness.

“Dear Karl Arthur, you must come down to dinner! I’ll hit upon something.”

“What will it be, pray?”

“I don’t know. . . . Ah, I have it! You’ll be perfectly satisfied. No one will know that the party had been planned in your honour. Only promise me that you will dress and come down!”

The dinner was a great success. Of all the delightful feasts given at the Ekenstedt home, this was the most memorable.

When the roasts were brought in and the champagne was served, there came a veritable surprise. The Colonel stood up and asked those present to join him in a toast to the happiness and prosperity of his daughter Eve and Lieutenant Sten Arcker, whose engagement he was pleased to announce.

There was general rejoicing.

Lieutenant Arcker was a poor man with no prospects to speak of. They all knew that he had long been daft about Eve Ekenstedt, and because the little Ekenstedt girls so seldom had any admirers, the whole city had been interested in this affair; but everyone had thought, of course, that the Baroness would nip it in the bud.

Afterward it leaked out that the Baroness had allowed Eve and Arcker to become engaged because there had been some hitch to the surprise she had hoped to give her guests.

But nobody thought any the less of the Baroness for that. On the contrary, people said there was no one who knew so well how to handle an embarrassing and difficult

situation as did Beata Ekenstedt.

* * *

The Baroness was one who expected an apology from a person who had offended against her. That little amenity discharged, she heartily forgave everything and was as friendly and trusting as before the breach.

All through the Christmas holidays, she hoped Karl Arthur would ask pardon for speaking so harshly to her the evening of the party. It was quite clear to her that he had forgotten himself in the heat of the moment, but she could not understand why he was so silent about his offence after he had had time for reflection.

But Karl Arthur let the holidays slip by without uttering a word of regret. He enjoyed himself as usual at dinner dances and sleighing parties, and was pleasant and attentive at home. Yet the few words his mother was waiting to hear remained unspoken. Only he and she noticed it, perhaps, but an invisible wall had risen between them which prevented their getting quite close to each other. There was no lack of love or tender expressions on either side, but the thing that separated them and kept them apart had not been removed.

When Karl was back at Upsala, he thought of nothing but to make up for his failure. If the Baroness expected a written apology from him, she was doomed to disappointment. He wrote only of his studies; he was reading Latin with two docents and attending Latin lectures every day. Besides, he had joined a seminar for practice in Latin disputation and oration. He was doing his level best to make good this time.

His letters home were most hopeful, and the Baroness answered them in the same spirit. Nevertheless, she felt anxious for him. He had been rude to his own mother and had made no apology. Now, for that, perhaps, he might be punished.

It was not that the Baroness wished to bring punishment upon her son; she had prayed God not to make note of the slight offence, but to let it be forgotten. She explained to our Lord that it was all her fault. "It was only my foolish vanity; I wanted to shine in the light of his success. It is I who deserve chastisement, and not he." But she continued to search his every letter for the missing words. Not finding them, her uneasiness increased. She had the feeling that it would not go well for Karl Arthur at the examination unless he was assured of her forgiveness.

Then, one day, toward the end of the term, the Baroness announced that she was going to Upsala to visit her good friend Malla Silverstolpe. They had met the previous summer in Kavlås, at the Gyllenhaals, and formed a pleasant friendship. Dear Malla had begged her to come to Upsala in the winter and meet her literary friends.

All Karlstad was surprised that the Baroness would set out upon such a long journey in the middle of the spring thaw. The Colonel, they thought, should have said no to this; but the Colonel assented, as usual.

She had a dreadful journey, as the Karlstaders had predicted. Several times her coach stuck in the mud and had to be lifted out on poles. Once a spring broke; another time it was the tongue. But the Baroness, frail little body that she was, struggled on bravely and merrily. Innkeepers and hostlers, blacksmiths and farmers she met along

the way were ready to lay down their lives for her. They all seemed to know how very necessary it was that she should get to Upsala.

The Baroness, of course, had notified Fru Malla Silverstolpe of her coming, but not Karl Arthur, and she had requested her not to let him know of it, as she wanted to give him a surprise.

At Enköping there was another delay. It was only a few miles more to Upsala, but now a wheel band had come off, and until that had been repaired she could proceed no farther. The Baroness was panic-stricken. She had been such a long time on the way, and the Latin examination might take place at any hour. Her sole object in making this journey was to afford Karl Arthur an opportunity to apologize to her before the examination. She felt in her heart that if this were left undone, no docents or lectures would profit him. He would inevitably fail again.

She could not rest in her room at the inn. Every little while she would run down the stairs and out into the yard to see whether the wheel had come back from the smithy.

On one of these restless excursions, she saw a cart turn into the yard. Beside the driver sat a youth wearing a student's cap who suddenly jumped from the wagon. Why—she could hardly believe her eyes—it was Karl Arthur!

He rushed up to his mother, seized her hand, and pressed it to his heart, while his beautiful, dreamy child-eyes looked pleadingly into hers.

“Mother!” he cried, “forgive me for my rudeness to you last winter, when you gave that party for me.”

It seemed almost too good to be true.

The Baroness freed her hand, flung her arms around Karl Arthur's neck, and nearly smothered him with kisses. Why he was there, she did not know, but she knew that she had got back her son, and this was the happiest moment of her life.

She drew him into the inn, and explanations followed.

No, there had been no examination as yet; it would take place on the morrow. But in spite of this he had set off for home, only to see her.

“What a madcap you are!” laughed the Baroness. “Did you think to drive to Karlstad and back in a day and a night?”

“No,” he said; “I let everything go by the wind, for I knew this had to be done. It was useless to try until I had your forgiveness. I should only have failed.”

“But, my boy, all that was necessary was the least little word in a letter.”

“This thing has been hanging over me the whole term like some obscure, intangible menace. I have been troubled, have lost confidence in myself without knowing why. But last night it all became clear to me: I had wounded the heart that beats for me so tenderly. I knew that I could not work with any hope of success until I had made my peace with my mother.”

The Baroness put a hand up to her brimming eyes, and the other went out to her son. “This is wonderful, Karl Arthur,” she said. “Tell me more!”

“Across the hall from me rooms another Värmländer, Pontus Friman by name. He is a Pietist, and doesn't mingle with the other students; nor had I come in contact with

him. But last night I felt impelled to go to his room and tell him how it was with me. ‘I have the dearest little mother in the world,’ I told him. ‘I have hurt her feelings and have not asked her forgiveness. What must I do?’ ”

“And he said——?”

“‘Go to your mother at once,’ he said. I told him that that was what I wanted to do above everything; but to-morrow I was to write *pro exercitio*. Besides, my parents would not approve of my skipping exams. Friman wouldn’t listen. ‘Go at once!’ he repeated. ‘Don’t think of anything now but to make your peace with your mother. God will help you.’ ”

“And you went?”

“Yes, Mother, I went to cast myself at your feet. But I was no sooner seated in the cart than it struck me that I had been inexcusably asinine. I felt strongly tempted to turn back, for I knew, of course, that even if I stayed at Upsala a few days more, your love would pardon all. Well, anyhow, I drove on. And God did help me, for I found you here. I don’t know how you happen to be here, but it must have been He Who sent you.”

Tears poured down the cheeks of both mother and son. For their sake had not a miracle been wrought? They felt that a kind Providence watched over them, and realized as never before how strong was the love that united them.

For an hour they sat together at the inn, whereupon the Baroness sent Karl Arthur back to Upsala, bidding him greet dear Malla Silverstolpe for her, and say that his mother was not coming to see her this time.

The Baroness did not care to go on to Upsala. The object of the journey had been accomplished. She could go home with her mind at ease, knowing that Karl Arthur would come through the ordeal with flying colours.

* * *

All Karlstad knew that the Baroness was religious. She went to church every Sunday as regularly as the pastor himself, and on weekdays she held a little devotional service, both morning and evening, with all her household. She had her poor, whom she remembered with gifts not only at Christmas but the whole year round. She provided midday meals for a number of needy schoolboys, and always gave a big coffee party to the old women of the poorhouse on Beata Day.

But no one in Karlstad, least of all the Baroness, had any idea it was displeasing to our Lord that she and the Provost, the Alderman, and the eldest of the cousins Stake indulged in a quiet game of boston after dinner on a Sunday. And little did they dream it was sinful of the young ladies and gentlemen who dropped in at the Colonel’s on Sunday evenings to take a bit of a whirl in the grand salon. Neither the Baroness nor anyone else in Karlstad had ever heard of its being a mortal sin to serve a glass of good wine at a feast, or to strike up a table song—often composed by the hostess herself—before draining the glass. Nor were they aware that our Lord would not countenance novel-reading and play-going. The Baroness liked to get up amateur theatricals and appear in them herself. It would have been a veritable sacrifice for her to abandon that

pleasure, for she was a born actress. Karlstaders were wont to say that if Fru Torsslow were but half as good an actress as Beata Ekenstedt, it was no wonder the Stockholmers raved so about her.

Karl Arthur had stayed on at Upsala a whole month after having happily passed the bothersome Latin examination. Meantime, he had been much in the company of Pontus Friman. Friman was a strict and zealous adherent of the pietistic cult, and Karl Arthur evidently had imbibed some of his ideas. It was not a case of sudden conversion or spiritual awakening, but it had been enough to make Karl Arthur feel uneasy because of the worldly pleasures and diversions which prevailed in the home.

One can understand that, just then, there was an especially intimate and tender accord between mother and son, so that Karl Arthur talked to his mother quite freely of the things he found objectionable, while she met his wishes in every way possible. Since it grieved him to have her play at cards, she pleaded headache the next Sunday afternoon, and let the Colonel take her place at the card table. Of course, she could not think of depriving the Provost and the Alderman of their usual game.

As Karl Arthur disapproved of dancing, she gave up that pleasure also. To the young folk who came to the house that evening she said that she was getting on in years (she was fifty) and did not care to dance any more. But seeing how disappointed they all looked, she sat down at the piano and played dance music for them until midnight.

Karl Arthur gave her certain books he wished her to read. She accepted them with thanks, and found them rather edifying and constructive. But how could the Baroness be content to read only these solemn, pietistical works? She was a woman of culture and *au courant* with the world's literature. And one day, when Karl Arthur came upon her unexpectedly, he noticed that under the sacred book she sat reading lay a copy of Byron's *Don Juan*. He turned away without a word, and she thought it dear of him not to chide her. The next day she put all her secular books into a large packing case and had them removed to the attic.

The Baroness, indeed, tried to be as obliging as she knew how. She was wise as well as gifted, and understood that all this was only a passing zeal with Karl Arthur; that the less he was opposed the sooner he would get over it.

Fortunately, it was summertime and the leading families were out of town, so that there were no social festivities going on. People went in for such simple pastimes as tramping in the woods, rowing on the river, berry-picking, and running-games.

However, toward the end of August, Eve Ekenstedt and her lieutenant were to celebrate their nuptials. Then the Baroness was quite concerned as to how the event would pass off. She had to give them a grand wedding; otherwise the Karlstaders would again be saying that she had no heart for her daughters.

Happily, her complaisance had a soothing effect upon Karl Arthur. He raised no objections to the proposed twelve-course dinner, or the garnished wedding cake, or the confections; he did not even protest against the wine and other potables ordered from Göteborg. Nor had he anything to say against a wedding at the cathedral and hanging garlands along the streets where the bridal procession was to pass, nor did he mind the magic lanterns, the tar casks, and the fireworks along the river bank. To tell the truth,

he took a hand in the preparations; he laboured in the sweat of his brow at binding wreaths and nailing up flags, like any common mortal.

There was one thing, though, on which he stood firm. There must be no dancing at the wedding. This the Baroness promised, pleased to let him have his way in that, since he had been so decent about everything else.

The Colonel and the girls protested a bit; they wondered what they could do with all the beaux and belles, especially the young officers, if they were not allowed to dance all night. The Baroness assured them it would be a jolly evening anyhow. The young people would go out into the garden and listen to the regimental band, watch the rockets rise to heaven, and see the reflection of the pretty coloured lanterns in the waters of the river. What better entertainment could one wish for? Surely, this was a more dignified and fitting way to celebrate a marriage than to hop round on a dance floor! The Colonel and the girls gave in, as always, and the harmony of house remained undisturbed.

On the day of the wedding the arrangements were perfect. The weather was propitious, the ceremony at the church impressive, and the numerous speeches and toasts at the wedding dinner went well. The Baroness had composed a charming marriage song, which was sung at the table, and the Värmland Regimental Band, stationed in the butler's pantry, struck up a march as each course was served. The guests, finding themselves generously regaled, were in festive mood.

But when they had risen from the table and had had their coffee, they were seized with an irresistible desire to dance.

The dinner had started at four o'clock and, well served as it had been by a special staff of butlers and waiters, it was over by seven. It seemed strange that the twelve courses, with the many toasts and fanfares and table songs, should have consumed but three hours! The Baroness had hoped the guests would remain seated at table till eight o'clock, and time to repair to the garden. Of course, there could be no talk of breaking up until midnight, and the guests grew restless as they thought of the long, dull hours before them.

"If only we might dance!" they sighed inwardly. (The Baroness had been thoughtful enough to let them know beforehand that there would be no dancing.) "How shall we amuse ourselves?" they wondered. "It will be dreadfully tiresome to sit and grind out small talk hour after hour."

The young girls looked down at their sheer, light frocks and their white satin slippers. These were meant for dancing. Dressed like that, how could they think of anything else?

The young lieutenants of the Värmland Regiment were in great demand as dancing partners. During the winter season they had to attend so many balls they grew almost weary of dancing; and sometimes it was hard work to get them on to the floor. But all summer they had not been to a big dinner party; they were now thoroughly rested, and ready to dance all night and all day.

Rarely had they seen so many pretty girls as were gathered at this wedding. What kind of party was it, anyway? Fancy! inviting a lot of beaux and belles to the house and

not allowing them to dance!

It was not only the young people who felt unhappy; their elders, too, thought it a pity the poor young things could not move about a bit so that they would have something to look at. Here were the best musicians in Värmland, and here, too, was the best ballroom; then, why in the world should one not take a little fling?

That Beata Ekenstedt, with all her amiability, had always been rather selfish, they thought. Because she herself was too old to dance, her young guests must sit about and adorn the walls.

The Baroness saw, heard, felt, and understood that her guests were displeased. Good hostess that she was, and accustomed to seeing everyone happy and gay at her parties, this situation was unspeakably trying. She knew that, next day and for many days thereafter, people would be talking about the Ekenstedt wedding and voting it the most tiresome affair they had ever attended.

To the older people, she made herself as agreeable as possible; she related her best anecdotes, came out with her wittiest sallies—but all in vain. They were in no mood to listen to her. The biggest old bore of a Fru at the wedding sat thinking to herself, if ever she were lucky enough to marry off a daughter of hers, she'd let the young folks dance, and the old folk, too.

To the younger ones she proposed running-games on the lawn. They simply stared at her. Running-games, forsooth, at a wedding! Had she been other than she was, they would have laughed in her face.

When the fireworks were to be touched off, the gentlemen offered an arm to the ladies for a stroll along the river bank. The young couples just dragged themselves on, hardly raising their eyes enough to follow the soaring rockets. They would accept no substitute for the pleasure they craved.

The harvest moon came rolling up, big and round and red, as if to heighten the brilliant spectacle. A wag remarked that it had swelled up with astonishment at seeing so many handsome young officers and lovely young damsels stand gazing into the river as if contemplating suicide.

Half Karlstad had gathered outside the garden wall to watch the “grand doings”; but seeing the young folk wander about, listless and indifferent, they all said it was the worst wedding they had ever beheld.

The regimental band did its utmost to lighten the gloom; but as the hostess had forbidden the playing of dance music, lest she find it impossible to hold the youths in leash, there were not many numbers on the programme. The same pieces had to be repeated again and again. It cannot be truthfully said that the hours dragged. Time stood still. The minute hand on all the clocks moved as slowly as the hour hand.

Out on the river, just beyond the Ekenstedt house, lay a couple of big barges, on one of which sat a music-loving sailor rasping out a peasant polka on a squeaky home-made fiddle.

And now all the poor souls who had suffered torment in the Ekenstedt garden brightened. This, at any rate, was dance music! They quickly stole out through the

garden gate and, in a moment, were seen whirling round in a country polka on the tarry bottom of a river barge.

The Baroness soon noted the flight and the dancing. It would never do to let the best girls in Karlstad dance on a dirty freight boat. She immediately sent word to her young guests to come back to the house. Colonel's lady though she was, even the youngest subaltern made no move to obey orders.

Then she gave it up as a lost game. She had done all that could be asked to please Karl Arthur; now she would have to save the reputation of the Ekenstedt house. She ordered the band to repair to the grand ballroom and play a contra-dance.

Shortly afterward, the dance-hungry youths came bounding up the stairs. Ah, now there was dancing! It was a ball such as rarely was seen in Karlstad. All who had been waiting and longing for this moment tried to make up for time lost. They glided and whirled, pirouetted and kicked. No one felt tired or indisposed. The plainest and least interesting girl there did not lack a partner.

Nor did the older people merely sit looking on. The joke of it was that the Baroness herself, who had given up dancing and card-playing and had relegated all her worldly books to the attic—even she was on the floor, gliding forward with ease and abandon and looking as young, aye, younger, than the daughter who had stood a bride that day.

The Karlstaders were glad to have back their merry, their charming, their adorable Baroness. The delight was extreme. The night had become enchantingly lovely. In fine, all was as it should be.

But the crowning proof of how contagious was the joy that swept through the rooms was that Karl Arthur himself caught it. All at once it struck him that there was nothing evil or sinful in moving about in time to the music with other young, light-hearted folk. It appeared only natural to him now that youth and health and happiness should take this form of expression. Had he felt as before, that to dance was a sin, he would not have danced. But to-night it all seemed such childish, such harmless amusement.

Just as Karl Arthur was doing his neatest steps in a reel, he happened to glance toward the open salon door.

There appeared a pale face, framed with black hair and black whiskers. And the large mild eyes stared at him in pained amazement.

He stopped in the middle of the dance, thinking, at first, it was an apparition. Then, in a moment, he recognized his friend Pontus Friman, who had promised to pay him a call when passing through Karlstad on his way home.

Karl Arthur instantly quit the dance and hastened to greet the unexpected guest, who without a word led him down the stairs and out of the house.

[1] Anna Maria Lenngren, leading woman poet of Sweden, satirized the social foibles of her time.

- [2] A noted Swedish historian and professor of history; also a poet of distinction.
- [3] Governor of Dalecarlia; Jurist; Publicist; a Member of the Cabinet and a Member of the Swedish Academy.
- [4] Writer: best known for her *Memoirs*. Her salon was a centre for the *literati* of Sweden.

CHAPTER II

THE PROPOSAL

SCHAGERSTRÖM had proposed!—Rich Schagerström of Stora Sjötorp!
No, but was it possible that Schagerström had proposed?

Oh, yes, it was very certain that Schagerström had proposed.

But how in the world came Schagerström to propose?

Well, it was like this: At Korskyrka Deanery there was a young girl named Charlotte Löwensköld, a distant relation of the Dean who acted as lady's-companion to his wife, and who was betrothed to his curate.

Then what had she to do with Schagerström?

Charlotte Löwensköld, you see, was vital, blithe, and outspoken. The moment she set foot inside the deanery, it was as if a freshening breeze had swept through the old house. The Dean and his wife were elderly folk who had moved about the place as mere shadows of themselves, until she came and put new life into them.

The Curate was thin as a rail, and so pious he hardly dared eat or drink. The whole long day he attended to his clerical tasks, and all night he knelt beside his bed, and wept for his sins. He was about ready to give up the ghost, when Charlotte appeared and stopped him from destroying himself altogether.

But what has all this got to do with Scha——

You must know that when the Curate first came to the deanery, some five years back, he had but just been ordained and was unfamiliar with the duties pertaining to his office. It was Charlotte Löwensköld who initiated him. She had lived all her life at a parsonage, and knew pretty well everything that went with it. She not only taught him how to baptize children, but even how to preside at a vestry meeting. It was then they fell in love; and now they had been engaged fully five years.

But we are getting away entirely from Schagerström!

—Charlotte Löwensköld, you see, was exceedingly clever at planning and managing for others. They had not been long engaged before she learned that her fiancé's parents did not like his being a cleric. They had wanted him to continue at the University until he had taken his master's degree and then study for the doctorate. He had spent five years at Upsala, and in the following year would have become a *magister*, when he suddenly decided to take, instead, the examination for Holy Orders.

His parents were rich and a bit covetous of honours. It was a great disappointment to them that their son had chosen so modest a career. Even after he had entered the Church, they implored him to return to the University; but he gave them a positive No. Now, Charlotte knew that his prospects for promotion would be better if he obtained a higher degree; so she sent him back to Upsala.

As he was the worst old grind imaginable, she had him finished in four years. By that time, he had not only taken his *licentiate*, but was a full-fledged Doctor of

Philosophy.

But what of Schagerström?

—Charlotte Löwensköld had figured out that her fiancé, after his graduation, would seek an appointment as headmaster at a *gymnasium*, where the remuneration would be sufficient to enable them to marry. If he needs must be a cleric, then in a few years' time he could have a large benefice, as had been the case with Dean Forsius and others. But it did not turn out as Charlotte had expected. Her fiancé wished to enter the ministry at once and go the way of the ordinary cleric; so he came back to Korskyrka as stipendiary curate. Doctor of Philosophy though he was, his compensation was less than that of a stableman.

Yes, but Schagerström——

—You understand, of course, that Charlotte, who had already waited five years, could not be content with this. But she was glad her affianced had been sent to Korskyrka and was now living at the deanery, where she could see him every day.

But we are not hearing anything about Schagerström!

Neither Charlotte Löwensköld nor her fiancé had any affiliation with Schagerström, who moved in a different world from theirs. The son of a high official in Stockholm, he was himself a man of means. He had married the daughter of a Värmland ironmaster—heiress to so many foundries and ore fields that her dowry alone amounted to some two or three millions. The Schagerströms had resided in Stockholm and had spent only the summer months in Värmland. They had been married but three years when the wife died in childbirth and the widower removed to Stora Sjötorp, in Korskyrka. He mourned her loss so deeply he could not bear to stay at a place where she had lived. Schagerström was now rarely seen in society; but passed his time supervising the administration of his various estates and remodelling and beautifying Stora Sjötorp, so that it became the most magnificent place in Korskyrka. Alone as he was, he kept many servants and lived like a *grand seigneur*. Charlotte would as soon have thought she could take down the Seven Stars to set in her bridal crown as to marry Schagerström.

Charlotte Löwensköld, you see, was the sort who would say anything that came into her head. One day, when they had a coffee party at the deanery and there were many guests, it happened that Schagerström went driving by in his big open landau, drawn by four black horses, a liveried footman on the box beside the coachman. Naturally, they all rushed to the windows and stood gazing after him as far as their eyes could follow. When he was well out of sight, Charlotte turned to her betrothed, who was standing back in the room, and shouted out so that everyone could hear:

“I'm rather fond of you, Karl Arthur, but if Schagerström should propose I'd accept him.”

The guests went into shrieks, quite certain that she could never catch Schagerström. Karl Arthur laughed, too, knowing she had said it merely for the amusement of the company. The girl herself seemed horrified at what had fallen from her lips. Yet, there may have been a little thought back of her words; she had wished, perhaps, to frighten Karl Arthur a bit, to make him think of the headmastership he should be seeking.

As for Schagerström—he was too utterly sunken in grief to have any thoughts of matrimony. But going about in the world of affairs, he made many friends and acquaintances who advised him to marry again. To all, he invariably excused himself with the plea that he was so dull and mournful no one would have him. Nor would he listen to any assurances to the contrary.

But once, at a fellowship dinner which Schagerström had felt obliged to attend, the moot question was the main topic of conversation. When he came out with his usual retort, a neighbour from Korskyrka told about the young girl who had said she would “sack” her intended if Schagerström came a-wooing. Everyone laughed heartily at the story, treating it as a huge joke, just as they had done at the deanery.

To tell the truth, Schagerström had found it rather hard to get along without a wife; but his heart was still with the dear departed, and the mere idea of putting another in her place seemed abhorrent to him.

Now, after hearing about Charlotte Löwensköld, his thoughts took a new turn. Supposing he were to contract a sensible marriage; if, for instance, he should marry a meek, humble, guileless young girl, who would not usurp the first wife’s place in his heart nor aspire to the high social position which had been hers by reason of her wealth and family connections, then the idea of a second union would be no insult to the departed.

The next Sunday, Schagerström came to church to have a look at the young girl, who sat with the Dean’s wife in the rectory pew. She was simply and modestly attired and there was nothing very striking about her appearance. But that was no detriment. Quite the reverse. Had she been a dazzling beauty, he would never have thought of choosing her for wife. The departed could rest assured that her successor in nowise filled her place.

As Schagerström sat gazing at Charlotte, he wondered what she would say if he called at the deanery and asked her to be mistress of Stora Sjötorp. Of course, she never expected, when saying what she did, that he would propose. Therefore it would be interesting to see what she would do if he took her at her word.

Driving home from church, he wondered how Charlotte Löwensköld would look in fine clothes. All at once he found a certain allure in the thought of a second marriage. The idea of coming quite unexpectedly to bring good fortune to a poor young girl had a touch of romance about it which was far from displeasing. The moment Schagerström realized this, he put it away from him as a temptation. He had always thought of his sainted wife as having left him only for a short time, and that some day they would be reunited. Meanwhile, he must be true to her memory.

That night, in his dreams, Schagerström saw his sainted wife. He awoke full of the old tenderness. The doubts and misgivings that had arisen in his mind on the way home from church seemed now to have been quite needless. His love still lived. There was no fear that the simple-hearted girl he thought of taking to wife would efface from his soul the image of the departed. He needed a wise and capable woman in the home; one who would be a companion and a comfort. Any regular house manageress suitable for the position he had not been able to find, or a female relative either. He saw no way but to marry.

That very day he set out in great state for the deanery. During the past few years he had led such a solitary life, he had made no calls even there. As may be imagined, there was no little excitement when the black four-span turned in at the Dean's gate. Schagerström was immediately conducted upstairs to the large salon, where he sat talking awhile with the Dean and his wife.

Charlotte Löwensköld had quietly stolen up to her room. In a few moments, the Dean's wife came and asked her to join them in the salon. Ironmaster Schagerström was calling, and it was rather tiresome for him having no one to talk to but two aged persons.

The old lady looked a bit flustered, but solemn. Charlotte opened her eyes wide with surprise, but asked no questions. She untied her apron, dipped her fingers in the wash basin, smoothed back her hair, put on a fresh collar, then followed after the Dean's wife. About to step out of the room, she turned back and put on her large apron again.

Charlotte had no sooner entered the salon and greeted Schagerström than she was requested to be seated. Whereupon the old Dean made her a little speech. He used many words, dilating upon the comfort and joy she had brought to the house. She had been as a dear daughter to him and his wife, and it would be hard for them to part with her. But now that a man like Ironmaster Gustaf Schagerström had come and asked for her hand in marriage, they must not think of themselves, but counsel her to accept an offer which was so much better than any she could have expected.

The Dean made no mention of the fact that she was already betrothed to his curate. Both he and his wife had been long opposed to this bond, and heartily wished it broken. A poor girl like Charlotte Löwensköld could not afford to tie herself up with a man who positively refused to seek a proper living.

Charlotte had listened without moving a muscle. The Dean, wishing to give her time to form a fitting reply, added a glowing eulogy of Schagerström. He spoke of his fine estates, his splendid achievements, his wonderful capabilities, his high ideals, and his kindness to his employees. He had heard so much good of Ironmaster Schagerström that, although this was his first visit to the deanery, he already regarded him as a friend into whose keeping he was glad to place the destiny of his young kinswoman.

All the while Schagerström sat regarding Charlotte, to see how she was taking his proposal. She suddenly straightened in her chair, threw back her head, her blue eyes turned almost black, and her lip curled in a scornful smile. Schagerström was struck with amazement. Charlotte Löwensköld was a beauty! And, moreover, a beauty who was neither meek nor humble.

Obviously, his offer had made a strong impression, but whether favourable or unfavourable, he hardly dared venture to guess.

However, he did not have to remain long in a state of uncertainty. The moment the Dean had finished, Charlotte Löwensköld spoke up:

"I wonder if Ironmaster Schagerström knows that I am engaged?"

"Oh, yes," said Schagerström. Before he could utter another word, Charlotte continued:

“Then how can Ironmaster Schagerström have the audacity to come and propose to me!”

That was what she said; she used such a word as *audacity* when speaking to the richest man in Korskyrka. She had forgotten that she was only a poor lady’s-companion. Now she was the proud aristocrat, the Honourable Fröken Löwensköld.

The old Dean and his wife were so shocked they nearly fell off their chairs. Schagerström, too, looked somewhat surprised; but he was a man of the world and knew how to act in an embarrassing situation. He stepped up to Charlotte, took one of her small hands between his two, and pressed it warmly.

“My dear Fröken Löwensköld,” he said, “your answer only increases my respect and admiration for you as an individual.”

He bowed to the Dean and to the Dean’s wife, and indicated by a gesture that they need not speak or see him to his carriage. They, as well as Charlotte, marvelled at the dignity of the rejected suitor as he withdrew from the room.

CHAPTER III

WISHES

IT IS of no consequence, surely, that a person sits wishing. If she does not lift so much as a finger to attain the object of her desire, what harm can there be in her wishing?

When a body knows that she is homely and poor and insignificant, while the one whom she covets has not a thought of her, then assuredly she may revel in her wishes as much as she likes.

If, in the bargain, she is married, and a virtuous wife, and has a little leaning toward pietism, and wouldn't for all the world do anything wrong, then what does it matter that she sits wishing?

If, moreover, she is all of thirty-two and the one she thinks of is but nine-and-twenty; if, besides, she is awkward and shy and has no social gifts, she might as well sit at home and wish from morning to night. There's nothing sinful in that, surely? It can't lead to anything.

Though she may regard the longings of others as light spring breezes and her own as powerful storm winds, that can move mountains and drive our planet out of its course, she knows these are but fancies which, in reality, have no effect.

She should be glad that she lives in the church town, right on the main street, where she can see him pass by her window almost every day; that she can hear him preach every Sunday; that she can come sometimes to the deanery, where she may sit in the same room with him, though her shyness prevents her from speaking.

Strangely enough, there was a slight bond between him and her. He was unaware of it, perhaps, and she had never thought to mention it. Her mother was a Malvina Spaak, sometime housekeeper at Hedeby Manor, the home of his maternal grandparents, Baron and Baroness Löwensköld. Malvina, when about thirty-five years of age, had married a poor farmer and afterward had toiled and slaved in her own home, at weaving and household tasks, as she had once done in the home of others. But she had always kept up her connection with the Löwenskölds. They had come to see her, and she had made long visits at Hedeby, giving a hand at the spring-cleaning and the autumn bakes. This had lent a little lustre to an otherwise dull existence.

She had often talked to her little daughter of the days when she was in service at Hedeby; of the dead general whose ghost had haunted the place, and of young Baron Adrian who had wanted to help his old grandfather find rest in his grave.

The daughter knew that the mother had been in love with young Adrian from the way in which she had spoken of him. How handsome he was! and how gentle! He had such a dreamy look in his eyes and such indescribable charm in his every movement. The girl had thought at the time that the mother was exaggerating. A young man such as she had pictured was not to be found on this earth.

Then one day she beheld him!

Shortly after her marriage to the organist and their removal to Korskyrka, she saw him one Sunday step into the pulpit. He was no baron, only a Pastor Ekenstedt; but he was the son of a sister to the Baron Adrian whom Malvina Spaak had loved, and was handsome and boyishly slender and lithe. She recognized the large dreamy eyes her mother had talked about, and the pleasant smile.

She thought, as she looked at him, that her wishing had brought him there. She had always longed to see a man who measured up to her mother's description of Adrian, and now at last she saw one! To be sure, she knew that wishes have no power; but it seemed strange, all the same, that he had come.

He did not appear to notice her, however, and toward the end of the summer he became engaged to Charlotte Löwensköld. In the autumn he returned to Upsala to continue his studies, and she thought he had gone out of her life forever. Wish as hard as she might, he would never come back to her.

Then, after an absence of five years, he appeared again in the pulpit, and again she thought he had come in answer to her wishes. He had given her no reason to think so. In fact, he was hardly aware of her existence, and he was still engaged to Charlotte Löwensköld.

She had never wished Charlotte any ill; she could lay her hand on the Bible and swear to that. Sometimes, though, she had wished that Charlotte would fall in love with somebody else, or that one of her rich relatives would invite her on a long journey to distant lands, so that she might be parted from young Ekenstedt in some pleasant and fortuitous way.

As wife of the organist, she was invited to the deanery now and then, and she chanced to be there the day Schagerström drove by and Charlotte said she would take him if he proposed. She had wished ever since that Schagerström would propose to Charlotte. Now, there was nothing wrong in that, surely? In any case, it had no significance.

If wishes had power, our world would be quite different from what it is. Only think how people have wished! Think how much good they have wished themselves! Think of the many who have wished themselves free from sin and sickness!—of all who have wished they might escape death! Aye, she could safely go on wishing, for wishes had no power.

But one bright Sunday that very summer, whom should she see walk into the church but Schagerström! She noticed that he chose a seat from where he could see Charlotte, and wished that he would think her pretty and alluring. With all her heart she wished it. Now, what harm was she doing Charlotte in wishing her a rich husband?

All that day she had the feeling that something was going to happen, and all night she lay tossing in a fever of expectancy. It was the same with her next morning: she could not do a stroke of work, but sat by the window with her hands crossed in her lap, waiting to see Schagerström drive by. But something far more wonderful happened. Late in the forenoon, Pastor Ekenstedt came to call.

It need hardly be said that she was surprised and delighted, and, at the same time, quite overcome with embarrassment. How she managed to greet him she never knew.

At all events, he was soon seated in the most comfortable chair in her snug little parlour, and she right opposite him, gazing into his face.

Never had he appeared so young to her as now, when she saw him near to. She was well informed on all matters concerning his family, and knew that he was then twenty-nine years of age, though he looked a mere boy.

He vouchsafed in his charmingly simple and earnest way that he had but recently learned, through a letter from his mother, that she was a daughter to the Malvina Spaak who had been a good friend and veritable godsend to all the Löwenskölds. He was sorry not to have known of this before, and thought she should have enlightened him.

She was happy to know just why he had never noticed her till now; but she could not say anything, could not explain. She mumbled a few stupid, incoherent words, which he did not catch.

He looked surprised; it seemed almost incredible that a person of her age should be so bashful as to lose the power of speech. To give her time to collect herself, he began to speak of Hedeby and Malvina Spaak. He also went into the story of the ghost and the fatal ring. He said it was rather hard for him to believe most of the details, but that underlying it all was a profound truth. The ring, to his mind, symbolized the love of the things of this world, which held the soul in thrall and made it unfit to enter the Kingdom of God.

To think that he should be sitting there with her regarding her with his adorable smile, and talking to her as naturally and easily as to an old friend! It was happiness almost too great!

He was perhaps accustomed to receive no verbal response when visiting the poor and disconsolate, to bring comfort and cheer; and went on talking. He had pondered long Christ's words to the rich youth, and was convinced that the primary cause of humanity's many ills lay in this, that they loved more the things created than they loved the Creator.

Although she had not uttered a word, she had listened in a way that tempted him to go farther. He confessed to her that he had no wish to become either a dean or a vicar. He did not want any large parish, with spacious parsonage, extensive fields, and big church books—many responsibilities. What he desired was a small charge, where he would have time to devote to the cure of souls. His parsonage should be only a little gray cottage beautifully situated in the heart of a birch grove, by the shore of a lake. And the salary must be no more than enough for him to live upon.

She understood that, in this way, he would show people the right road to happiness, and her whole soul went out to him in worship. Never had she seen anything so young, so pure! How the people would love him! Of a sudden it struck her that what he had just said did not accord with something she had recently heard, and she wished to be quite clear on this point.

Had she been misinformed? The last time she was at the deanery she had heard his betrothed say that he intended to seek a position as headmaster of a *gymnasium*.

He sprang to his feet and began to pace the floor of the little parlour.

Had Charlotte said that? Was she certain that Charlotte had said it? He spoke so sharply it frightened her; but she answered in all meekness that, to the best of her recollection, Charlotte had said just that.

The blood mounted to his face and his wrath rose. She was so distressed she could have fallen at his feet and implored his forgiveness. Never had she thought he would take so to heart what she had told him of Charlotte. What should she say to “make him good” again? What could she do to appease him?

In the midst of her tense anxiety, she heard the tramp of horses and the rumble of wheels, and from force of habit turned toward the window. It was Schagerström who drove by. But her mind was all taken up with Karl Arthur, and she had no time to wonder whither the other was faring. Karl Arthur did not see the farer-by; he was still pacing the floor, a grim look on his face.

Suddenly, he stepped up to her and put out his hand in farewell. It was a terrible disappointment that he should be leaving so soon. She could have bitten her tongue off for uttering the words that had put him in such bad humour. There was nothing to do but take his proffered hand. She must be silent and let him go. In sheer desperation, she bent down and kissed his hand. He quickly drew it away and looked at her in surprise.

“I only wanted to ask your pardon,” she stammered.

He saw tears in her eyes, and felt moved to offer her some sort of explanation.

“Suppose, Fru Sundler, that for one reason or other you had placed a bandage before your eyes so that you saw nothing, and had put yourself into the hands of another, that she might lead you; how would you feel if the bandage were suddenly torn away and you found that your friend, your guide, whom you had trusted more than yourself, had drawn you to the edge of a precipice, and another step would have sent you over it? Would you not suffer the torments of hell?”

After this rhetorical outburst, he dashed out the door, never waiting for an answer. But on the porch he stopped. Fru Sundler wondered what made him. Perhaps he remembered how pleased and happy he had been when he entered her house—he who was now leaving it in anger and despair. She ran out to see whether he was still there.

He began talking the instant she appeared. The mental excitement had given new impetus to his thoughts, and he was glad to have a listener.

“I’m standing here looking at the pretty roses that border the path to your house, my dear Fru Sundler, and am asking myself if this is not the most beautiful summer I have ever known. Here we are now at the end of July, but is it not true that so far the weather has been perfect? Have not all the days been long and light?—longer and lighter than ever before? The heat, to be sure, has been rather intense, but never oppressive. Generally, there has been a freshening breeze to liven the air. Nor has the earth suffered drought as in other fair summers. Almost nightly we have had an hour or two of rain. The growing things have flourished beyond all expectation. Have you ever seen the trees so massed with foliage, or the flower beds in the gardens so gorgeously colourful? Ah! the raspberries were never so sweet, the bird-song never so clear, the people never so merry and pleasure loving as they are this year.”

He paused for a moment to take breath. Thea Sundler was careful not to disturb him by so much as a word. She thought of her sainted mother, and understood how she must have felt when the young baron had come to her in the kitchen or the milk room and given her his confidence.

The young clergyman continued:

“When at five o’clock of a morning I draw up my shade I see only clouds and mists. The rain patters against the windowpane and gushes down the water spout. Grasses and flowers bend to the shower. The clouds are so heavy with rain they almost trail along the ground. ‘To-day there’s an end to the fine weather,’ I say to myself, ‘and perhaps ’tis well.’

“Though almost certain the rain will continue all day, I stand at the window awhile to see what it will do. At five minutes past five of the clock the patter on the windowpane ceases; the water spout gushes a moment more, then it, too, subsides. Just at that point in the sky where the sun should appear comes a rent in the curtain of cloud, and a cluster of rays shoots down through the earthly mists. Soon the heavy gray vapours that rise from the hills at the horizon are transformed into thin blue mists. The raindrops on the grass blades trickle slowly to the ground, and the flowers lift up their sadly drooping chalices. Our little lake, which until now has looked quite sombre, begins to glitter as if a school of goldfish had swum up on to the surface of the water. Transported by all this beauty, I open wide my window and inhale the moist, scent-laden air—a delight beyond the imagination. And I cry out: ‘O God, Thou hast made Thy world too beautiful!’ ”

The young pastor smiled and gave a little shrug. He probably thought Thea Sundler was a bit shocked at his last utterance, and hastened to explain:

“I meant what I said. I have been afraid that this beautiful summer would beguile me into a love of the earthly. How often have I not wished the fine weather would come to an end! that the summer would bring thunder and lightning, drought and humidity, rainy days and chilly nights, as in other years.”

Thea Sundler fairly hung on his words. Whither was he leading? What would he say? She did not know, but she wished almost convulsively that he would continue and let her enjoy awhile longer the rich, mellow tones of his voice, his beautiful language, and expressive play of feature.

“Do you follow me?” he suddenly burst out. “But perhaps Nature has no power over you; does not speak to you in strong, mystic words; does not ask you why you do not accept her bounties thankfully; why you do not lay hold of happiness when it is within your reach; why you do not get you a home of your own and marry your heart’s beloved, as others are doing this blessed summer?”

He raised his hat and passed a hand across his brow.

“This lovely summer has been as a confederate to Charlotte. All this opulence, this mildness, this perpetual smoothness has intoxicated me. I have gone about like a blind man. Charlotte has seen my love grow stronger day by day, and my ardent desire to possess her.

“Ah, you do not know!—Every morning at six o’clock I leave the little annex, where my quarters are, and go up to the main building for early coffee. Charlotte joins me in the light, spacious dining room, where the fresh morning air comes pouring in at the open windows. She is happy and twitters like a bird as we sit down to our coffee, just we two.

“You think, perhaps, that Charlotte takes advantage of the occasion to discuss with me our plans for the future. Ah, no! She talks to me of my sick; my poor; she speaks of the points in my sermon that have especially impressed her. In all respects she seems to be just what a clergyman’s wife should be. Very rarely—and then only in jest and by the way—does she mention the headmastership. Every day she becomes more dear to me. When I’m back at my desk, I sit dreaming of Charlotte, and find it hard to do any work. I have already told you how I would order my life. I believe that my love will free Charlotte from her worldly shackles and that she will come with me to my little gray cottage.”

At this Thea Sundler involuntarily emitted a cry.

“Yes, of course you were right,” he said. “I have been blind. Charlotte has been leading me toward a pit. Hoping to draw from me, in a moment of weakness, the promise to seek a mastership, she wished to prepare you and others for the change, should I decide to enter upon a new field of activity. But God has protected me.”

He went close up to Thea Sundler. He must have read in her face that she was enjoying his talk; that she was happy; enraptured. It irritated him that she should delight in this flow of rhetoric called forth by his suffering. A look of contempt spread over his face. “Don’t imagine that I am thankful to you for what you have told me,” he said.

Fru Sundler was terrified. He had doubled his fists and was shaking them at her.

“I don’t thank you for snatching the bandage from before my eyes. You should not be pleased at what you have done. I hate you for not letting me fall into the pit! I wish never to see you again!”

He turned on his heel and walked rapidly down the narrow path between Fru Sundler’s pretty rose borders out into the road.

Thea Sundler, utterly crushed, went back into her parlour. She cast herself upon the floor and wept as she had never wept in all her life.

CHAPTER IV

IN THE DEANERY GARDEN

IT WAS only five-minutes' walk from the church town to the deanery; but in those few minutes Karl Arthur thought of many stern and lordly things he would say to his betrothed.

"The time is come," he muttered to himself. "Nothing shall stop me now. To-day we must arrive at an understanding. She must know that, much as I love her, nothing will induce me to strive after the worldly advantages which she seeks. I must serve my God. I cannot do otherwise; rather would I tear her from my heart."

He felt proudly confident. Now, as never before, he had at his command words that would crush, stir, convince. His strong agitation had set up an inner shaking and thrown open the door to a chamber in his mind of which he had not, till then, been aware.

The walls of this room were covered with rich clusters and beautiful blooming vines. The clusters and vines were words—luscious, glorious, consummate words. He had only to come forth and take possession. All this wealth—an inconceivable wealth of words—was his.

He laughed at himself as he thought how he had had to cudgel his brains for ideas, in making up his sermons, and dig for words; yet all the while this "wealth" had been within him.

As far as Charlotte was concerned, things would be quite different after this. She had tried to lord it over him; but now all that was changed. He would talk and she listen; he would lead and she follow. Hereafter she should hang upon his words as did that poor wife of the organist. It meant strife, but he would never give in to her. Sooner than that, he would tear her out of his heart; yes, tear her out of his heart!

Just as he reached the deanery, the gates swung open, and an elegant carriage, drawn by four black horses, came rolling out.

He understood, of course, that Ironmaster Schagerström had been calling at the house, and it put him in mind of the remark Charlotte had let drop at the coffee party. It struck him in a flash that Schagerström had proposed to his fiancée. He dismissed the thought at once as utterly absurd, but all the same his heart contracted.

Was it not a most peculiar look the rich man had given him in passing? Was there not a sinister curiosity and, at the same time, compassion in that look?

Without doubt, he had guessed rightly. His heart stood still, everything went black to his eyes; he could barely drag himself up to the gatepost.

Charlotte had answered Yes. He would lose her and die of despair. While in the throes of an overwhelming anguish, he saw his fiancée come out of the house and hasten toward him. He noted the high colour in her cheeks, the bright look of her eyes, and the expression of triumph about her mouth. She was coming to tell him that she was to marry the richest man in the parish.

Such shamelessness! He clenched his fists, stamped his foot, and shouted out: "Don't come near me!"

She stopped short. Was she really surprised, or only shamming?

"What is the matter with you?" she asked him coolly.

He quickly summoned his strength, and roared at her: "You know well enough! What was Schagerström doing here?"

When Charlotte grasped the fact that he had guessed Schagerström's errand, she went right up to him and raised her hand as if she could have struck him in the face.

"So you, too, think I would break my word for a bit of gold and goods!" She gave him a look of contempt, then turned and walked away.

Anyhow, her words had allayed his worst suspicions. His heart gave a bound, and he felt his strength returning; he was able to follow after her.

"But he has proposed to you, hasn't he?" he said.

She scorned to make reply. Now she squared her shoulders and held her head stiffly erect, as she walked on, past the house, down a narrow path which led to the garden.

Karl Arthur knew she had reason to be offended. If she had rejected Schagerström, she had done a splendid thing. He attempted to justify himself.

"You should have seen the face he put up as he drove past me. He didn't look as though he had been repulsed."

She held her proud head higher still, and quickened her steps. She did not have to speak, her bearing told him plainly enough that his company was not desired; that she was going this way because she wished to be alone.

He perceived more clearly now the devotion and self-sacrifice in her act, and so he continued to follow her.

"Charlotte!" he cried. "Darling Charlotte!"

She showed no sign of weakening, but swept on, down the garden path.

Alas, this garden, this deanery garden! Charlotte could not have directed her steps to a spot more rich in memories precious to both of them.

It was a garden laid out in the old French manner, with many intersecting walks bordered by thick, man-high hedges of lilac. Here and there in the hedge was a narrow opening, through which one passed either into a small bower containing a homely, moss-grown seat, or out upon an even grass plot encircling a solitary rose tree. Though not a spacious garden, nor perhaps a beautiful one, it was an ideal trysting place for lovers.

As Karl Arthur hastened on in the footsteps of Charlotte, who would not so much as give him a glance, poignant memories awoke in him—memories of the many happy hours she had walked here with him as his loving sweetheart.

"Charlotte!" he cried out again.

There was a note of anguish in his voice that made her stop. She did not turn around, but the tautness in her bearing vanished perceptibly. She bent backward, toward him, so that he almost saw her face. He sprang to her side, caught her in his arms, and

kissed her. Then, drawing her into a bower, he went down on his knees before her, and poured himself out in rhapsodic praises of her love, her constancy, her heroic courage.

His sudden fervour of enthusiasm was so surprising that she listened almost with distrust. And he knew why. There had always been a certain restraint in his attitude toward her. To him, she had represented the world and its allurements, against which he must be ever on his guard.

But in that blessed moment, when he knew how she had withstood the temptation of great riches, he could give rein to his feelings. She tried to tell him about Schagerström's wooing, but he interrupted her continually with his kisses. When she had told him everything, he had to kiss her again, repeatedly. At last they sat in a long embrace.

Where were the strong, imperious words he had meant to say to her? Gone from the mind; swept out of memory. They were no longer necessary, now that he felt this dear girl could never be a menace to him. She was no slave of Mammon, she who on this day had scorned wealth to remain true to him.

As she rested in his arms, a sweet smile trembled on her lips. She looked happy, more happy than ever he had seen her. Of what was she thinking? Perhaps at that moment she was saying to herself that his love was the only thing that mattered? Perhaps she had given up all thought of the headmastership, which had come so near to parting them?

She did not speak; he was listening to her thoughts: "Let us soon be united. I make no conditions. I ask for nothing but your love."

But, should he allow her to outdo him in generosity? Ah, he would make her supremely happy; he would whisper to her, now that he understood her disposition, and dared, that he would find a proper living for them.

How blissful this stillness! Perhaps she heard what he said to himself—heard the promise he made her? He tried to put his thoughts into words.

"Ah, Charlotte," he said, "how can I ever repay you for what you have sacrificed to-day for my sake!"

She sat with her head resting against his shoulder, and he could not see her face.

"My love," he heard her say, "I have no fear but that you will compensate me richly."

"Compensate"—what did she mean? Did she mean that his love was the only compensation she desired, or had she something else in mind? Why was she holding her head down? Why didn't she look him in the eyes? Did she think him such a poor catch that he needs must pay her for being faithful to him? But he was a clergyman and a Doctor of Philosophy—a man of good family. He had always tried to fulfil his duties, and was beginning to gain recognition as a preacher, and he had lived an exemplary life. Did she really think it a great sacrifice on her part to reject Schagerström?

No, no, she meant nothing of the sort. He must be calm; he must probe her thoughts with gentleness and patience.

"Just what do you mean by compensation? I have nothing whatever to offer you."

She moved closer and whispered into his ear:

“You think too poorly of yourself, my friend. You can become both provost and bishop.”

He drew away from her so quickly she came near falling.

“Then it was because you hoped I would become a provost and a bishop that you rejected Schagerström!”

She stared at him—bewildered—as one who has just come out of a dream. Yes, of course she had been dreaming. She had talked in her sleep and revealed her secret thoughts.

Why was she silent? Did she think his question called for no answer?

“I ask you again, was it because you thought I would become a provost and a bishop that you rejected Schagerström?”

The colour mounted to her cheeks. The Löwensköld blood was surging in her veins, yet she held her peace.

Ah, but he must, he must have an answer! “Didn’t you hear me ask you if it was because you expect me to become a provost and a bishop that you said No to Schagerström?”

She flung her head back and her eyes flashed fire.

“Oh, certainly!” she threw at him in a tone of utter contempt.

He rose to his feet, not wishing to sit beside her any longer. Her answer pained him exceedingly, but he would not admit it before a creature like Charlotte. However, as he did not wish to have anything to reproach himself for, he again tried to speak gently, and in all kindness, to this lost child of the world.

“My dear Charlotte,” he said, “I cannot thank you enough for being so honest with me. I understand now that to you externals are everything. A blameless life, a constant striving to follow in the footsteps of Christ, my Master, mean nothing to you.” He waited in suspense for her answer.

“My dear Karl Arthur,” she said, “I think I know your worth, although I do not fawn upon you like the ladies of the church town.”

Her reply seemed to him a positive vulgarity. The unmasked woman was venting her chagrin.

Charlotte rose to go, but Karl Arthur seized her by the arm and made her stay. This talk had to be carried on to a conclusion. That about the ladies of the church town had put him in mind of Fru Sundler. Remembering what she had told him, his ire began to rise; he was fairly boiling inside. The pressure forced the door to the room in his mind which held the vines and clusters of strong, eloquent words. Now he took a stern, admonitory tone; he upbraided her for her love of the world; her pride; her vanity.

Charlotte did not listen long to such talk.

“Bad as I am,” she reminded him, “I have nevertheless said No this day to Schagerström.”

“Good God!” he exclaimed, “what is the woman made of? She has but just confessed to giving Schagerström No merely because she preferred a bishop to an ironmaster.”

Through it all spoke a still, small voice in his heart. It told him to have a care. Had he not marked that Charlotte Löwensköld disdained to defend herself? If anyone thought ill of her, she never tried to disabuse him of his evil suspicions.

He did not listen to the small warning voice; he had no faith in it. Charlotte’s every utterance only revealed to him new depths of depravity. And now he heard her say:

“My dear Karl Arthur, don’t attach so much importance to what I said as to your attaining such high distinction. It was all a joke. I don’t believe you can ever become either a provost or a bishop.”

He was already overwrought and sorely offended, but after this fresh onslaught the still, small voice within was mute. The blood surged in his ears and his hands shook. The wretched woman had robbed him of his self-control and was driving him mad.

He was conscious of jumping up and down in front of her, of raising his voice to a shriek. He knew that his jaw was shaking and his hands were beating the air. His loathing of her was unspeakable; it could not be interpreted in words, but had to express itself in motions.

“All your vileness is plain to me now,” he shouted. “I see you now as you are. Never, never will I marry a woman like you. You would be my destruction.”

“Anyhow,” said Charlotte, “I have been of some slight service to you. It is thanks to me, is it not, that you are now a licentiate and a doctor of philosophy?”

After that it was not he, himself, who spoke to her. He heard the things that fell from his lips, and approved them; but the words came as a surprise; they seemed to be put into his mouth by another.

“You see!” cried the voice. “Now she reminds me that she has waited for me five years and, consequently, I am compelled to marry her. But I shall marry only whom God chooses for me.”

“Don’t speak of God!” she said.

He turned his face upward and began to study the clouds.

“Yes, yes, yes, I shall let God choose for me. The first woman that crosses my path shall be my wife.”

Charlotte gave a cry and sprang to his side.

“Oh, Karl Arthur, Karl Arthur!” She tried to draw down one of his uplifted arms.

“Don’t touch me!” he yelled savagely.

She put her arms around his neck, not realizing the extent of his fury.

A howl of hate broke from his throat, he caught her arms in an iron grip and flung her back on to the bench, then fled from her sight.

CHAPTER V

THE DALAR GIRL

WHEN Karl Arthur Ekenstedt first saw Korskyrka Deanery, with its stately lindens, its green privet hedge, its venerable gateposts and white gate, through whose pickets could be seen the big circular sward and gravelled walks, the wide red-painted, two-story house, with its two equally large wings—the curate’s to the right, the tenant farmer’s to the left—he said to himself: “This is how a Swedish parsonage should look, at once cosily inviting and restful, at the same time inspiring in the beholder a feeling of reverence.”

And afterward, as he noted the well-kept lawns, the orderly arrangement of the flower beds, where the plants were all of uniform height and at equal distances apart; the decorative designs of the border beds along the nicely raked walks; the carefully pruned wildgrape vines around the small porch; and the long, rich curtains that hung down in even, graceful folds at every window—this, too, gave him a feeling of satisfaction and respect. He knew instinctively that all who lived here must feel in duty bound to behave in a proper and sensible way.

Little did he think that one day he—Karl Arthur Ekenstedt—would be running toward the white gate, his hat poised on one ear, his arms battling the air, and short, ugly howls issuing from his mouth. Shutting the gate behind him, he gave a wild laugh; he fancied the old house and the flowers in their beds stared after him in astonishment.

“Did you ever see the like of it?” went the whisper from flower to flower. “What sort of creature can that be?”

Aye, and the trees wondered, the grass wondered, the whole place wondered. He could hear how surprised they all were.

Could this be the son of the charming Baroness Ekenstedt, the most cultivated lady in all Värmland, who was running away from the deanery as if fleeing the abode of sin and evil?

Could this be a clergyman of Korskyrka Deanery, which had housed so many circumspect and dignified servants of the Lord, who was now going out upon the highway with a fixed determination to propose to the first unmarried woman he met? Was it young Ekenstedt, who had been so delicately reared and had always associated with people of culture and refinement, who recklessly set out to take as companion for life the first female he chanced upon?

Did he not know that he might get a tittle-tattler or a lazybones, a silly goose or a harpy, a slattern or a wasp-tongue? Didn’t he realize that he was faring forth on the most hazardous adventure of his life?

Karl Arthur stood at the gate a moment, listening to the murmurs that went from tree to tree, from flower to flower. Ah, yes, he knew it was a precarious venture, but he also knew that this summer at Korskyrka he had loved the world more than he had his

God. Feeling that Charlotte Löwensköld had been a menace to his soul, he wished to raise a barrier between him and her, an impenetrable wall of separation.

He knew the instant he had thrust Charlotte out of his heart, it opened again to Christ. And now he would show his Saviour how boundless was his love for Him; how he trusted in Him above everything. Therefore, he was going to let the Lord choose a wife for him.

No doubts assailed him as he stood at the gate looking toward the road. He thought he showed the greatest courage a man could have by placing his fate wholly in the Hand of God.

The last thing before leaving the gate, he said an "Our Father." During the prayer, all became quiet within and he also regained his outward composure. The angry flush disappeared from his face, and his jaw no longer trembled.

And now, as he walked toward the village, which he needs must do, of course, if he wished to meet people, his mind was not wholly free from dread. He had gone no farther than to the end of the deanery hedge when he suddenly halted. It was the poor, timorous heart of the man that stopped him. Only an hour or so earlier, returning from the church town, he had met at this very spot the deaf beggar woman, Karin Johansdotter, in her patched kirtle and thread-worn shawl, and shouldering her long beggar's pack.

To be sure, she had been married once on a time, though now a widow these many years, and free to marry again. A sudden fear that she might be the one he would meet had made him pause. But he scoffed at the poor, frightened thing in his breast that tried to prevent him carrying out his purpose—and walked on.

A moment later, he heard the rumble of a moving vehicle, and shortly afterward a cart, drawn by a fine pacer, passed him in the road.

In the cart sat one of the proud, influential mine-owners of the district who was reputed to be rich as Schagerström. He had a daughter with him, and, had he come from the other direction, the young clergyman, in accordance with his avowal, would have been obliged to signal the arrogant man to stop so that he could propose to the daughter.

It was not easy to say what the sequence to such a rash act would have been. . . . A cut of the whip across the face most likely. Mine-owner Aaron Månsson was accustomed to marry off his daughters to counts and barons, and not to humble curates.

The old sinful self that dwelt in his heart was again afraid, and counselled him to turn back. This was a foolhardy venture, it told him. But the brave new man of God in him now raised a jubilant voice; he rejoiced in the opportunity to show how great were his faith and trust.

To the right of the road towered a steep, sandy ridge, its slopes overgrown with pine saplings, young birch trees, and hagberry bushes. In among the thickets a woman was singing. Karl Arthur did not see the singer, but he knew the voice well; it belonged to the tavern-keeper's giddy daughter—she who ran after all the fellows. She was not far away, and might appear in the road at any moment.

Karl Arthur stepped softly now, lest his footfalls be heard by the singer; he even looked about for some way of escape.

On the other side of the road lay a meadow where a herd of cows was grazing. The cows were not alone. A woman was there, milking. Her he knew also. She was the tenant farmer's cow girl, who was tall as a man and who had three illegitimate children. His whole being shrank in horror. Whispering a prayer to his Maker, he hastened on.

The tavern-keeper's daughter still yodelled in the bush, and the big cow girl, having finished her milking, was preparing to go home. Luckily, neither of them crossed his path.

The wretched old sinner in him now took a new tack. He said that perhaps our Lord had shown him these two loose women not so much to test his faith and courage as to warn him. Perhaps He wanted to let him see what a reckless, idiotic thing he was doing.

Karl Arthur immediately silenced the weak, wavering sinner in him, and continued his quest. Should he give up for a thing so trivial? Should he believe more in his own fears than in the power of God?

At last he saw a woman coming down the road. Her he could not avoid. Though she was still at some distance he recognized her. It was Crofter Matts's Elin, whose whole face was disfigured by a purple birthmark. For an instant he stood aghast. The girl was not only hideous to behold, she was also the poorest person in the parish. Her father and mother were both dead, and she had ten dependent younger brothers and sisters to care for.

He had visited her in her lowly hut, swarming with dirty, ragged youngsters whom the eldest sister vainly strove to feed and clothe. The perspiration of dread stood thick on his brow, but he folded his hands and advanced resolutely.

"It is for her sake, that she may receive help, all this has come to pass," he mumbled to himself as they were rapidly nearing each other.

A true martyrdom was opening up to him, and he would not turn aside for anything in that line. For this poor girl he had no such feeling of revulsion as the cow girl or the tavern-keeper's daughter had aroused in him. Of her he had heard only good.

A few strides more and they would have been face to face—when, happily, she turned off from the road. Someone had called to her from the wood, and she quickly disappeared among the tangle of thickets.

Now that Crofter Matts's Elin was out of the way he felt that a heavy load had been lifted off his chest. With fresh assurance, he strode on, his head held high—proud as if he had actually walked on the water to prove the strength of his faith.

"The Lord is with me," he said. "Christ walks with me on this journey, holding over me His protecting shield." This thought sustained him, and filled his heart with gladness.

"The right one will soon appear. The Lord has been testing me; He has seen that I am in earnest. I shall not turn back. My bride-elect approaches."

He had just covered the short stretch of road between the deanery and the church town and was turning in on the village street, when a cottage door opened and a young girl came out. She crossed the small garden path that led from the house and stepped into the road almost in front of Karl Arthur.

She had appeared so suddenly he had not seen her until she was almost upon him. He stood stock-still. Instantly he thought: “Ah, here she is! Didn’t I know it? I had the feeling just now that she was coming my way.” Claspng his hands, he gave thanks to God for His great and wondrous mercy.

She who came toward him was a young woman from a parish in northern Dalarna who went about the country as house-to-house peddler. She was dressed in the picturesque red and green, black and white peasant costume of her home parish. Here at Korskyrka, where the old peasant dress had long been laid away, she shone like a rose of the wilderness.

The girl herself was even prettier than her clothes. Her hair curled softly around a fine forehead, which, otherwise, would have appeared rather high, and her features were perfect. Above all, it was the deep, brooding eyes and the fine black eyebrows that settled the matter. Such lovely eyes and brows would have lent beauty even to a plain face. Moreover, she was tall and well built. None could doubt for a moment that she was strong and healthy. Though shouldering a large leather bag full of merchandise, she held herself erect and moved with ease, as if quite unconscious of her burden.

Karl Arthur was entranced. It was summer incarnate coming toward him—the rich, warm, blooming summer of that year. Had he been an artist, he would have painted it just so.

But, if it was summer approaching, it was not a summer he need fear. Quite the contrary. God wanted him to open his heart to it and rejoice in its beauty. His lovely bride-elect had come from distant hill regions, from the home of poverty and lowliness. She did not know the lure of riches, the consuming passion for material things that caused the children of the plains to forget their Creator. This daughter of the people would not hesitate to marry a man because he wished to remain poor all his life.

Verily, the wisdom of God surpasseth all! The Lord knew what was needful for him and, by a turn of His Hand, had placed in his path the woman more suited to him than any other.

The young clergyman was so lost in his own musings that he made no move toward the beautiful Dalar girl. When she saw how he was devouring her with his eyes, she could not help laughing to herself.

“You stare as if it was a bear you’d met,” said she.

Karl Arthur laughed, too. It was extraordinary how light-hearted he had become all at once!

“Oh, no, it was no bear I fancied I saw.”

“Then it must have been the Wood Nymph. ’Tis said that folk get so cracky when they see her they can’t move hand or foot.” She smiled, showing the prettiest, the most dazzling teeth, and wished to pass on; but he quickly barred her way.

“You can’t go,” he said, firmly. “I must speak with you. Sit you down here at the side of the road!”

She was surprised at the imperative command; but thinking he wanted to purchase some of her wares, she said: “I can’t open the bag out here on the highway.”

Immediately, a light broke in upon her. "Aren't you the pastor of this parish? I thought I saw you in the pulpit yesterday."

Karl Arthur was glad she had heard him preach and knew who he was.

"Oh, yes," he affirmed, "it was I who preached; but I'm only an assistant pastor."

"Then you must be living at the deanery," she said. "I'm just on my way there. You come round to the kitchen, and I'll sell you the whole bagful of goods."

"But I do not wish to purchase your wares," the Curate replied. "I want to ask you to be my wife." He spoke in a choked voice, for he was deeply moved. It seemed to him that all Nature—the birds, the quivering leaves of the trees, the grazing kine—was aware of the solemn event, and awaited in breathless suspense the young woman's answer.

She turned quickly to see whether he was in earnest, but otherwise seemed quite indifferent. "We might meet here in the road at ten this evening. I have business of my own to think of now."

With that, she went on her way. He let her go, certain she would come back and give him a Yea. For was she not the bride God had chosen for him?

Karl Arthur, however, was in no mood to go home and settle down to work. He turned toward the heights, and when he had gone far enough into the wood not to be seen from the road, he flung himself down upon the ground.

What luck! What marvellous luck! What dangers he had escaped! How wonderful were the happenings of that day!

Now all his troubles were over. Never again could Charlotte Löwensköld tempt him to become a slave of Mammon. Hereafter, he would follow his own bent. The meek and lowly wife would let him walk in the footsteps of Jesus. He saw in his mind's eye the little gray cottage, the blessed simple life, the perfect harmony between his teaching and his mode of living.

He lay blinking up at the brushy greenery through which the sunbeams were trying to steal, and it seemed to him that, in the same way, a new, auspicious love was stealing into his harrowed, broken heart.

CHAPTER VI

THE MORNING COFFEE

THERE was one who could have righted it all had she cared to; but that was perhaps too much to ask of a person who year after year had filled her heart with vain desires and longings.

That mere wishes can in any way affect the main issues of life would be difficult to prove; but without doubt they can take possession of the mind, weaken the will, and stifle the conscience.

All Monday afternoon Fru Sundler had grieved over what she had said of Charlotte, because it had driven Karl Arthur away. To think that *he* had been there, under her roof, and had talked to her quite freely and been more charming than ever she had dreamed him! Yet she, by her stupidity and want of discretion, had offended him to such a degree as to make him declare he never wished to see her again.

She was angry at herself and at all the world, and when her husband suggested that they go over to the church and sing awhile, as they were wont to do on summer evenings, she turned upon him so sharply that he fled the house and took refuge at the tavern.

This caused her still further chagrin, for she wished to appear, both in her own eyes and in the eyes of others, as one without fault or blemish. She knew that Organist Sundler had espoused her merely because he admired her singing voice so much that he wanted to hear it every day. And she had always honourably discharged her indebtedness to him for establishing her in a nice little home, thereby relieving her of the necessity of earning her bread as a nursery governess. But that evening she was unable to meet her payment. Had she attempted to lift up her voice in the House of God, no sweet tones or pious words would have poured from her throat, but only lamentation and blasphemy.

However, at about half-past eight, to her great and unspeakable delight, who should come but Karl Arthur! He stepped in, happy and unconcerned, and asked whether Fru Sundler could give him some supper. She must have appeared somewhat surprised at the request, for he hastened to explain that he had been lying in the woods the whole afternoon and had not only slept through the dinner hour, but had also missed the evening meal, which was always served punctually at eight at the deanery. Did Fru Sundler, perchance, have in the house a bit of bread and butter with which he might appease his gnawing hunger?

Thea Sundler was not daughter to that excellent housekeeper Malvina Spaak for nothing; nor could it be said that she herself was a poor housewife. She immediately brought forth from her cupboard not only bread and butter, but also ham, eggs, and milk.

In her joy over Karl Arthur's return, and his asking a favour of her, as of an old friend of the family, she found the courage to tell him how sorry she was for what she had said that morning. Surely he could never have thought that she had any desire to

create ill feeling between him and his betrothed. She understood, to be sure, that teaching was also a noble calling; yet, she could but hope, aye, and pray to God that Dr. Ekenstedt might continue as pastor here at the countryside, where one had so few opportunities to hear a living Gospel.

Karl Arthur, of course, replied that if anyone should apologize it was he. She had no occasion to regret her words. He knew now that Providence had put them into her mouth; and they had been to him both a revelation and a help.

One word led to another, and Karl Arthur soon told her everything that had transpired since their meeting in the forenoon. He was so exuberantly happy, so filled with wonder at God's great mercy to him, he simply had to talk, had to tell it all to a fellow being. It was pure luck, his coming upon this Thea Sundler, who, through her mother, knew his people.

Fru Sundler must have known, when hearing about the broken troth and also the new one, that this would end in nothing but misery. She must have understood that it was only out of pique and contrariness his fiancée had answered in the affirmative his query as to whether she preferred a bishop. And she must have known, too, that the covenant with the Dalar woman was not as yet so binding but it could be broken.

But when one has been longing for years to meet a charming young man and to become his friend and confidante (nothing more, of course), would one be likely to reason with him the very first time he bared his soul to one's vision? Nor was it possible for Thea Sundler to be anything but all admiration and sympathy, and to regard his tramp to the church town as a veritable act of heroism. That she should try to clear Charlotte's name—now, could one ask it? That she, for example, should remind Karl Arthur that his fiancée had a rare gift for planning and doing for others but seldom showed any cleverness in matters that concerned herself alone—ah, no, that was hardly to be expected of her!

In all probability Karl Arthur was not so sure of himself as he appeared to be. A slight hint might have made him hesitate; an honest protest or a word of warning would have been enough, perhaps, to make him relinquish all thought of a new troth. But Fru Sundler said nothing to warn or frighten him; to her it was all perfectly glorious.

Think of his placing his fate like that in the Hand of God! Think of his tearing the loved one out of his heart so that he might follow in the footsteps of Jesus! Karl Arthur, indeed, received no discouragement; on the contrary, he was encouraged to go on.

Who knows? Perhaps Fru Sundler was quite sincere. She had both Almquist and Stagnelius on her parlour table, and she was a romanticist from crown to toe. Here at last was an adventure! Here was something positively thrilling!

There was just one little point in Karl Arthur's story that troubled Fru Sundler: If Charlotte was as avid for worldly advantages as Karl Arthur maintained (and Thea Sundler was not inclined to dispute it), then why had she said No to Schagerström? What could she have hoped to gain by her rejection of the Ironmaster?

Of a sudden, it all became clear to her. Charlotte had played for high stakes. Ah, Thea Sundler knew her thoroughly!

Charlotte, of course, had immediately regretted her refusal of Schagerström and had wished herself free from Karl Arthur so that she could give the rich ironmaster a different answer. That was why she had made a scene and worked Karl Arthur up to such a pitch that he finally broke with her. Here was the explanation; this was the truth of the matter.

Fru Sundler imparted her conclusions to Karl Arthur, but he only flouted them. She argued and elucidated; still, he refused to believe her. She stuck to her point, however, and in this instance she had the temerity to contradict him.

They were still arguing when the clock struck the hour of ten and he should be off to meet the Dalar woman. Fru Sundler had only succeeded in creating a slight doubt in his mind. Her own assurance, however, was unshakable; she averred that by to-morrow, or at most within a few days, Charlotte would be engaged to Schagerström.

Indeed, Thea Sundler had not righted the mischief. On the contrary, she had sent a fresh poison dart into the mind of Karl Arthur.

There was one who would have liked to make things right again; there was Charlotte herself. But what could she do just then? Karl Arthur had rooted her out of his heart as if she had been a noxious weed. She had come between him and his God; therefore she was nothing to him. Even if he had wished to listen to her, could one imagine Charlotte choosing her words with care? Had she, the high-spirited, impulsive young girl, the wisdom to put aside her pride and speak the soft, conciliatory words that would save the lover?

* * *

When Karl Arthur next morning took his customary stroll from the annex to the main building for morning coffee, he paused time and again to inhale great draughts of the bracing air, to admire the velvety sheen of the dewy grass, the gorgeous colour array of the perennials, and the cheery hum of the honeybees. He felt, with pleasurable satisfaction, that to-day, for the first time (inasmuch as he had freed himself from the temptations of the world), he could enjoy the beauties of nature with perfect comfort.

As he stepped into the dining room, there, to his amazement, stood Charlotte, waiting to greet him, as usual. His mellow mood instantly changed to petty resentment. He had thought himself free; thought the battle was over. Charlotte evidently did not understand that the break was final and conclusive. Not wishing to be pointedly uncivil, he said a curt "Good-morning" and, pretending not to see the hand she held out to him, he went straight over to the table and sat down.

Now, that should have been enough, he thought, to show her that she need trouble him no further with her presence; but Charlotte, obviously, did not wish to see, for she continued to keep him company.

He was careful not to raise his eyes, lest he should meet her gaze, but he had seen, at the one glance he had given her, that she was ashen-pale and that her eyes were red and swollen. Her whole appearance indicated that she had passed a sleepless night, in anguish and mayhap qualms of conscience.

Oh, well—he had not slept, either. From ten until two he had sat on a wooded hill, conversing with the “God-elected” bride. The usual early morning shower had forced them to part company, and had sent him scurrying back to the deanery. But, with a new and happy love filling his heart, the hours had been too blissful to sleep away. He had passed the rest of the night at his desk, writing the good news to his parents; and had thus lived over again those few short hours of perfect bliss. Certainly, none could have told by his appearance that he had not had a wink of sleep! Never had he felt better or more full of life.

It was embarrassing to have Charlotte fussing around him as if nothing had occurred; she moved the cream pitcher and rusk basket nearer to him, went over to the pantry slide and fetched the hot coffee. As she filled his cup, she inquired in a casual tone, as if asking about something quite usual and commonplace:

“Well, how did it go for you?”

It was positively distasteful to have to make reply. An afterglow of sanctity still rested over the summer night he had passed in the company of the young Dalar girl. The hours had not been employed in demonstrations of tenderness, but in explaining to her how he would pattern his life after the example of Christ. Her quiet way of listening, her gentle, hesitating replies, her modest concurrence had given him the self-confidence he needed. But how would Charlotte understand the peace, the happiness, which he had found?

“The Lord helped me,” was all he at last managed to reply.

Charlotte was pouring coffee for herself as the words fell; they must have startled her, for she sat down so suddenly, as if her knees had given way.

“Good heavens, Karl Arthur! Surely you can’t have been off and done something foolish?”

“Didn’t you hear what I said I would do when we parted yesterday?”

“Yes, of course I heard; but, dearest, I thought it was only a shot in the air to frighten me.”

“You may be sure that when I say I place my fate in the Hand of God, I do it.”

Charlotte helped herself to sugar and cream and crumbled a rusk. Karl Arthur inferred from her silence that she was playing for time to collect herself.

He was surprised that she should appear so distressed. He remembered what Fru Sundler had said about Charlotte’s precipitating the break. But in that his new friend certainly had been mistaken; Charlotte evidently had no thought of engaging herself to Schagerström.

“So you actually rushed off and proposed to the first woman you met,” she said in the casual tone in which she started the conversation.

“Yes, Charlotte, I let God choose for me.”

“And, of course, it was a foolish choice!” she shrieked.

He recognized the old Charlotte in this irreverent utterance, and could not resist the pleasure of administering a fitting rebuke.

“To place one’s reliance upon God has always been foolishness in your eyes, Charlotte.”

Her hand shook perceptibly, and the spoon clinked against the cup, but she did not permit herself to make an angry retort.

“For pity’s sake,” she begged, “let us not carry on as we did yesterday!”

“Quite right, Charlotte, considering that I am happier now than I have been heretofore.”

It was a brutal thrust, but he thought it imperative to let her know that he had become reconciled to his God and that his mind was at rest.

“So you are happy,” said Charlotte.

It was not easy to tell what lay behind her remark. . . . Was it bitter grief or derisive surprise?

“The way lies clear before me,” pursued Karl Arthur. “All barriers to my living by the spirit of Christ have been swept away; the Lord has sent me the right woman.” He stressed his present felicity more than was necessary; but there was something in her quiet demeanour that troubled him; she did not yet seem to comprehend that he was serious, that the matter had been settled for good and all.

“It must have gone better for you than I thought,” said Charlotte, dropping back into an easy, conversational tone. “I shall say nothing until I hear to whom you are now engaged.”

“Her name is Anna Svärd,” he said. “Anna Svärd.” He could not help repeating her name; the mere sound of it called up visions of the night’s enchantment—young love’s power of enchantment—and dispelled the unpleasantness of the moment.

“Anna Svärd,” said Charlotte, but in what a different tone! “Do I know her?”

“I dare say you have seen her; she is from Dalarna.” Charlotte looked blankly questioning.

“She is not one of your fine acquaintances, Charlotte; she is a poor and lowly person.”

“It can’t be——” she broke out with such vehemence that he had to look at her. (Her sensitive face expressed the utmost horror.)—“it can’t be that Dalar woman who came into the kitchen yesterday. God in heaven, Karl Arthur, I seem to have heard that her name is Anna Svärd!”

He could not doubt that her horror was genuine, but that didn’t make it any the pleasanter. The guardianship she was assuming over him! And what lack of understanding she evinced! She should have heard Thea Sundler last evening!

He quickly moistened another hard rusk in his coffee, thinking to hurry through his breakfast in order to escape the lamentation that would be coming now. But, strangely enough, none came. Charlotte merely turned in her chair so that she could see his face. Though she sat silent he knew that she was weeping.

He got up to go, though still half-hungry. So she was taking it like that! It was impossible to hold to Fru Sundler’s hypothesis that Charlotte had wanted to break off

with him; he had to believe in her acute distress, and, since her distress caused him a slight twinge of conscience, he would rather not witness it.

“Don’t go!” Charlotte implored him without rising. “We must speak further about this. It is such a dreadful thing, it cannot, it must not happen.”

“It grieves me to see that you take it so hard, but, Charlotte, I assure you that we two were not made for each other.”

She sprang to her feet and stood facing him, her head flung back. “Do you think I’m weeping on my own account?” she said, contemptuously dashing a tear from the corner of her eye. “Do you think I care whether I am unhappy? Don’t you understand it is for you I weep? You are meant to rise high, but with such a wife everything will go to pot!”

“What an expression!”

“I say what I mean. If you are bent upon marrying a peasant woman, I advise you, my friend, to take someone from this part of the country—some person you know; but don’t go marry a peddler woman who roams about the kingdom, alone and unprotected. You are not a child; you must know what such things mean.”

He tried to stem the devastating torrent of words coming from this short-sighted being who did not understand what was in question.

“She is the bride God has appointed for me,” he reminded her.

“She is not!” Charlotte perhaps would have said that the bride God had intended for him was herself. Perhaps it was the thought of this that sent the tears coursing down her cheeks. She strove to regain control of her voice.

“Think of your parents!” she said.

“I’m not afraid of my parents!” he coolly replied. “They are earnest Christians; they will understand.”

“Baroness Beata Ekenstedt!” cried Charlotte, aghast—“will she understand? Ah, Karl Arthur, little you know your own mother if you think she would receive as her daughter-in-law a Dalecarlian peddler woman!”

Karl Arthur, who had been quite calm through it all, felt his temper rising.

“Let us drop this talk about my parents,” he said in a stern voice.

Charlotte saw that she had gone too far. “No,” she replied, “we’ll say no more about your parents. Let us speak, instead, of the Dean and his wife here at Korskyrka, of the Bishop in Karlstad, and the whole Consistory. What do you think they will say when they hear of a clergyman’s rushing out on the highway and proposing to the first woman he meets? And what will people say here in Korskyrka, where they exact from their clergy the strictest decorum? You may not even be allowed to remain in the parish. And how do you think the other clergymen in the diocese will regard your strange courtship? You may be sure they and everyone in Värmland will be horrified. People will lose respect for you. No one will come to church when you preach. You will be sent to some poor wilderness parish up in the northern forests, and you will be nothing but a stipendiary curate to the end of your days.”

Charlotte was so worked up that she could have talked on and on; but she suddenly noticed that her vehement protests made no impression whatever upon Karl Arthur.

To tell the truth, he was surprised at himself; he was really a changed man. Only the day before he had attached significance to her slightest utterance, and now it was quite immaterial to him what she thought of his behaviour.

“Isn’t it the truth I am telling you?” she put to him squarely. “Can you deny it?”

“I cannot discuss matters of this kind with you, Charlotte,” he said with an air of superiority; for he felt that, since the previous day, he had become, in a sense, her superior. “You speak only of preferment and favour with the rich and powerful; but it is just this that I consider harmful to a clergyman. I hold that a life of poverty with a humble wife who herself bakes your bread and scrubs your floors is what makes a parson free and independent and exalts him.”

Charlotte made no answer. Karl Arthur, turning his gaze on her, saw that she was standing with downcast eyes and moving the tips of her feet forward and back, like a child when it feels embarrassed.

“I do not wish to be the kind of pastor who merely points the way to others,” Karl Arthur averred. “I would also tread the path myself.”

Charlotte stood silent. A pink glow spread over her cheek and a smile of infinite tenderness trembled on her lips. At length she said something surprising:

“Don’t you think that I, too, can bake and scrub?”

Was she jesting, or what? She had the innocent look of a young girl at her first Communion.

“I would not stand in your light, Karl Arthur. You shall serve Christ and I will serve you. I came down this morning just to tell you that all shall be as you wish. I will do anything for you, only don’t turn me away!”

He came a step or two nearer, then stopped as if fearing a trap.

“My beloved,” she said in a voice scarcely audible, but trembling with emotion, “you don’t know what I went through last night! It must be that I had to come so near losing you to understand the depth of my love.”

He came a step nearer, and looked at her, as if trying to read her mind.

“Don’t you love me any more, Karl Arthur?” She lifted to him a face white as death with anguish.

He was about to say that he had cast her out of his heart when something told him it was untrue. Her words had moved him; had fanned the smouldering embers of his love.

“You are not playing with me, Charlotte?”

“Oh, Karl Arthur, don’t you see that I am in earnest?”

And now all the old love in his heart flamed anew. The night in the wood, the new sweetheart faded as mists before the sun; they were forgotten as one forgets a dream.

“But I have already asked Anna Svård to be my wife,” he murmured haltingly.

“Oh, that little tangle can easily be straightened; to her you have been engaged only overnight.”

He was drawn as by a magnet, nearer and nearer; the love that went out from her was strong and irresistible.

She suddenly flung her arms about him and cried:

“I ask for nothing, nothing, only don’t drive me away!”

Still he wavered. It seemed almost unbelievable, her yielding so completely.

“But you must allow me to go my own way,” he said.

“You shall be a true, a living way-shower, Karl Arthur; you shall teach the people to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, and I will work for you and with you.”

She spoke with the warmest, the fullest conviction; and at last he believed her. The battle which for five years had been going on between them was now at an end, and he was the victor; he could afford to dismiss all doubt. As he bent down to her to seal their new bond with a kiss, the door from the hall opened. Charlotte’s face was turned in that direction, and a look of terror suddenly froze her features. Karl Arthur wheeled quickly to see what had frightened her.

On the threshold stood a maidservant holding out a bouquet. “It is from the Ironmaster at Stora Sjötorp,” the girl announced. “The head gardener brought it. He is standing out in the kitchen, if Fröken would like to thank him.”

“This is a mistake,” said Charlotte. “Why should I receive flowers from Stora Sjötorp? Alma, go take the flowers back to the gardener!”

Karl Arthur had followed the exchange of words with close attention. Here was a test. Now he would know to a certainty.

“The gardener says positively the flowers are for Fröken,” declared the maid, who could not understand why one should not accept a few posies.

“Oh, well—put them over there,” said Charlotte, pointing toward a side table.

Karl Arthur was breathing hard. So she had accepted the flowers! Now he knew enough.

When the maid had gone and Charlotte again turned to Karl Arthur, he had no desire to kiss her. The warning, fortunately, had come in time.

“I understand that Charlotte would like to go out to the gardener and send her thanks by him,” he said; and with a bow of annihilating politeness, he left the room.

Charlotte did not follow him. A sense of weariness now crept upon her. Had she not humbled herself enough to save the man she loved? Why had the bouquet come at the critical moment? Did not God wish him to be saved?

She went over to the table where the flowers lay, dewy fresh and brilliant. Almost blinded by tears and scarcely conscious of what she did, she began to pluck the flowers to pieces. Before she could destroy them all, the maid reappeared with something else for her. It was a small envelope addressed to her in Karl Arthur’s handwriting.

As she tore it open, a plain gold ring dropped out and slipped through her trembling hands on to the floor. She let it lie where it had fallen while she read the few lines Karl Arthur had scribbled on a half-sheet.

A certain person I met last evening, and with whom I had a confidential talk about my personal affairs, intimated to me that Charlotte had immediately regretted her rejection of Schagerström; that Charlotte had deliberately forced a quarrel to make me break with her so that she could give Schagerström a better reception next time. I refused to believe it possible; but I see now that such is the case, and return, herewith, Charlotte's ring.

I presume that Charlotte promptly notified Schagerström yesterday that our engagement was off. Charlotte, of course, became uneasy while waiting for his answer, and so wished to make up with me. The bouquet of flowers, I infer, was the token of agreement. Had not this been the case, Charlotte, in the then prevailing circumstances, could not have accepted it.

Charlotte read the letter several times, but could not make it out. " 'A person I met last evening . . . ' I don't understand," she said helplessly. " 'A person I met last evening—a person I met . . . ' "

At the same time she felt that something cold and slimy—something that was like a huge reptile, was winding its coils around her and would surely crush her.

It was the venomous serpent of slander that snared her in, and it held her captive a long, long time.

CHAPTER VII

THE SUGAR BASIN

IN HIS early days at Korskyrka, Karl Arthur Ekenstedt was a terribly strict Pietist, and regarded Charlotte Löwensköld as a lost child of the world, with whom he did not care to bandy words. Naturally, this nettled Charlotte, and she determined to make him show her proper respect.

She soon perceived how inexperienced he was in all practical things a clergyman is expected to know, and offered him some helpful suggestions. He was embarrassed at first, and repulsed her; but after a while he became more appreciative of her kindness and encroached almost too much at times upon her good nature.

He used to go on long tramps to visit the poor old men and old women who lived in little cabins out in the forest, and would always ask her to accompany him. He said that she understood much better than he how to comfort these aged people in their petty troubles and cheer them up.

It was during these trips together that Charlotte came to love Karl Arthur. Before, she had always fancied that she would marry a dashing, gallant military officer; and now she was hopelessly enamoured of the refined and sensitive young curate, who wouldn't kill a fly and who had never permitted a swear word to cross his lips.

For a time they were allowed to continue their walks and talks undisturbed. But, early in July, Karl Arthur's sister Jaquette came on a visit. The Dean's wife being an old friend of his mother, it was only natural that she should invite his sister to spend a few weeks at the deanery.

Charlotte shared her room with Jaquette, and the two girls immediately became fast friends. Jaquette was so devoted to Charlotte that one would have thought it was on her account she had come to Korskyrka rather than the brother's.

Shortly after Jaquette's return to her home, Fru Forsius received a letter from Baroness Ekenstedt, inviting Charlotte to come to Karlstad for a visit with Jaquette. Her daughter, wrote the Baroness, talked of nothing but the charming young girl she had met at the deanery. She longed to see her again and had spoken of her in such glowing terms as to make her dear mamma quite curious to see her.

The Baroness, on her part, was especially interested in Charlotte because of her being a Löwensköld. The girl undoubtedly belonged to the younger branch of the family, which had never been "baronetted," but at all events she was descended from the old Hedeby General, so that there was a bond of kinship between them.

Charlotte declared outright that she would not go. She was not so stupid but what she understood that the Dean's wife, in the first place, and now Jaquette, had informed the Baroness about her and Karl Arthur, and that she was to be sent to Karlstad so that the Baroness could see and judge for herself whether she would be a desirable daughter-in-law.

The Dean's wife and Karl Arthur, in particular, begged her to go. (Karl Arthur and Charlotte were at that time secretly engaged.) He would be everlastingly grateful if she would grant his mother's request. He who had entered the ministry against the wishes of his parents of course would never give her up, no matter what they thought. But he was sure that, did they but see her, they would be charmed. Never had he met a young girl who could get on so well with elderly persons. It was seeing how kind and helpful she was to the Dean and his wife, and to all old people, that had first attracted him to her. If she would only go to Karlstad, all would be well. She was finally persuaded to accept his mother's invitation.

It was a day's journey to Karlstad and, as it would not have done for Charlotte to travel alone, the Dean's wife arranged to have her go with Ironmaster Moberger and his wife, who were going to the city to attend a wedding. With many admonitions and much sage advice, the old lady sent her off, Charlotte having promised, of course, to be "sensible and dignified."

But to sit the whole long day on the narrow front seat of a closed carriage, gazing at the Moberger couple, who sat dozing in their separate corners, was not the most auspicious preliminary to the Karlstad visit.

Fru Moberger thought she felt a draught, and on no condition would she have a window open at more than one side of the carriage, and sometimes not even on that. The hotter and closer it became in the coach, the better she slept. Charlotte tried at first to start conversation, but her travelling companions, having had much to attend to before leaving home, were tired and wanted to rest.

Charlotte's small feet tapped and tapped on the floor of the carriage without her being aware of it. Fru Moberger, wakened by the noise, kindly requested her to be quiet.

They stopped at several inns along the way, where the Mobergers opened their lunch bag, and of course they insisted upon Charlotte's sharing their fare. In fact, they were very kind to her during the entire journey. All the same, it was a wonder they ever got her to Karlstad; for, the longer she sat agonizing in the heat, the more despondent she became. She had taken this trip only on Karl Arthur's account, and now, of a sudden, it seemed as if all her love were gone. So, why should she go on to Karlstad to show herself? Several times she felt tempted to open the carriage door, leap out, and run home; she sat on simply because she was too weary and heartsick to move.

When, at length, she arrived at the Ekenstedt home, she was hardly in a mood to be sensible and dignified. She wanted to shriek, or dance, or smash something; that would have restored the balance and put her in good humour. Jaquette Ekenstedt, pleased and happy, greeted her with open arms. The instant Charlotte saw her she became conscious of her own shabby attire; her clothes were ordinary and old-fashioned. Worst of all, there was something wrong with her shoes; they were new and had been made expressly for the occasion. The parish cobbler had done his level best; but the shoes squeaked and gave forth an odour of leather.

Jaquette conducted her friend through several beautiful rooms to the Baroness's cabinet; and as Charlotte, in passing, noted the smooth parquet floors, the great mirrors, and the decorative friezes above the doors, she gave it up for lost. She would never be

accepted as daughter-in-law of this house. It was sheer stupidity, her coming here. Her first impression, of having jumped into the wrong barrel, by no means passed when she entered the Baroness's cabinet.

The Baroness was sitting in an easy chair over by the window, reading a French novel. Glancing up from her book, she said a few words to Charlotte in French. She was so absorbed in her reading that she was not conscious of speaking in a foreign tongue. Charlotte understood perfectly what the Baroness said, but felt vexed, thinking her ladyship wished to ascertain whether she had any linguistic accomplishments. Charlotte answered her in the broadest of Värmland dialects. It was not the Värmland speech of the gentry, which is easily understood, but the patois of serving folk and peasants.

The Baroness elevated her eyebrows a trifle, obviously amused as Charlotte went on to show her astounding command of Värmland argot. Since she couldn't shriek or dance or smash things, it was a comfort to take refuge in homely speech. The game was lost, in any case, but she could at least show these fine folk that she would not curry favour with them by pretending to be better than she was.

The family had already supped when Charlotte arrived and, after a little, the Baroness bade Jaquette take her young friend down to the dining room and see that she had something to eat before retiring.

With that, happily, the day was over.

The next day being a Sunday, immediately after breakfast they went to church, to hear Provost Sjöberg preach. After the service, which lasted two and a half hours, the Colonel, the Baroness, Jaquette, and Charlotte passed another wearisome hour, strolling in Karlstad Square. They met many of the Colonel's friends. Several men joined them, but they walked with the Baroness, and talked only to her. For Charlotte and Jaquette they had no word or glance.

Then came the dinner with the family and their kinsfolk—the Provost and his wife, the Alderman and his, the brothers Stake, Eve and her lieutenant.

During the repast, the Baroness carried on a refined and intellectual conversation with the Provost and the Alderman. Eve and Jaquette said not a word, and Charlotte, too, was silent—understanding that it was the rule in this house for the young to be seen and not heard.

Charlotte, meanwhile, wished herself miles away. She lay in wait, so to speak, for a chance to prove to Karl Arthur's parents her utter unfitness to be daughter-in-law of theirs. Her Värmland argot, apparently, was not enough; she would have to hit upon something more drastic and conclusive.

After such a journey, and such a sermon, and such a promenade, and such a dinner, she must make it quite plain that she wished to terminate her visit at once.

A maid was passing round a bowl of raspberries, and Charlotte, like the others, helped herself; whereupon she reached for the sugar basin, which stood near to hand, and proceeded to sweeten her berries. She had no idea that she was taking more than the required amount until Jaquette quickly said in a whisper:

“Don't take so much sugar! Mamma won't like it.”

Charlotte knew, to be sure, that many old persons thought it a sinful extravagance to sweeten one's food. At home in Korskyrka, if she but touched a sugar spoon she received a reprimand from the Dean; so she was not at all surprised. But, at the same time, she saw a way to give vent to the rebellious feelings that had been rising in her from the time she left home. Now she dug deep into the basin and heaped spoonful after spoonful of sugar on her plate, till it presently looked like a snow-drift in miniature.

There was an ominous silence. Everyone felt that such conduct could not be overlooked. Nor was it long before the Baroness remarked: "The raspberries at Korskyrka must be very tart. Here they are not so bad."

Charlotte went right on sugaring, thinking to herself the while: "If I keep it up I shall lose Karl Arthur and be unhappy ever after; but all the same I must."

The Baroness gave a slight shrug and turned to the Provost to continue their interrupted conversation.

The Colonel now came to his wife's aid. "You are spoiling the flavour of the berries, my dear Fröken Charlotte," he said.

The words were hardly out of his mouth when Charlotte laid down the spoon, picked up the sugar basin with both hands, and emptied all it contained on to her plate. Whereupon she put the basin back on the table and replaced the spoon. Then, settling herself comfortably in her seat, she glared at her table companions, ready to meet the storm.

"Jaquette," said the Colonel, "perhaps you would like to take your friend upstairs to your room?"

The Baroness put up a restraining hand. "No, no," she said, "not in that way!"

She sat quietly thinking a moment; suddenly a glint of merriment came into her beautiful eyes, and she turned, not to Charlotte, but to the Provost.

"Have you heard, Cousin, what happened when my Aunt Clementine was to marry Count Cronfelt? The fathers of both parties met at the Riksdag in Stockholm and arranged the match. When they had settled it all between them, the young Count protested that he must at least see his intended before committing himself. But Aunt Clementine was at home in Hedeby and, since it would have occasioned considerable remark had she been suddenly carried off to Stockholm, it was decided that the Count should go down to Bro Parish and see her at church. No, Cousin, my Aunt Clementine was not averse to marrying a handsome young nobleman; but she had heard that he was coming to the church to take a look at her; and she did not like being placed, as it were, on exhibition. On that particular Sunday she would have preferred not to attend Divine Service, but, in those days, for the young to go contrary to anything their parents had decided was unthinkable. The young girl had to make herself as presentable as possible and go sit in the Lövensköld pew so that Count Cronfelt and one of his friends could take stock of her. But, Cousin, do you know what she did? When the verger struck up the opening psalm, she began to sing in a loud voice and quite off key, and she did the same in every psalm all through the service. When she afterward came out on the church knoll, there stood Cronfelt bowing to her. 'I ask your gracious pardon,' he said.

‘I understand that a Fröken Löwensköld cannot allow herself to be shown like a horse at a fair.’ With that, he went his way. But he came again, Cousin, and made the young lady’s acquaintance at her home. They married, of course, and no doubt lived happily. But, I dare say, my cousin has heard the story before?”

“Oh, yes, but never so well related,” said the Provost, not understanding.

But Charlotte understood. She sat there, her heart filled with a great hope, her eyes fixed upon the speaker in wonder and admiration. The Baroness glanced at her and smiled, then turned once again to the Provost.

“As you see, Cousin, we have with us to-day a young girl; she came here that my husband and I might look her over and see whether she would do as wife for our son. The young girl, Cousin, is a true Löwensköld, and does not like being put on exhibition. Cousin, I assure you that, ever since her arrival last evening, she has been at pains to sing false, just like my Aunt Clementine. And I now do as did Count Cronfelt—I ask her gracious pardon, and say to her that I understand that a Fröken Löwensköld cannot allow herself to be shown like a horse at a fair.”

The Baroness stood up and held out her arms. Charlotte fell on her neck and wept for joy, and wonder, and gratitude.

From that moment she had loved Karl Arthur’s mother almost more than she loved Karl Arthur himself. It was for his mother’s sake, that her hopes might be fulfilled, that she had persuaded Karl Arthur to return to Upsala and continue his studies. It was for her sake she had sought that summer to make a headmaster of him; that he might have a standing in the world, and be something more than a poor country parson. And it was for her sake that she had controlled and humbled herself that morning before Karl Arthur.

CHAPTER VIII

THE LETTER

CHARLOTTE LÖWENSKÖLD sat in her room writing to her mother-in-law, or, properly speaking, to the one whom she had regarded until that day as her future mother-in-law—the Baroness Ekenstedt.

It was a long letter, for she was writing to the only person in the world who had always understood her.

For the first, there was an account of Schagerström's wooing and all that had happened afterward. She described the scene in the garden, and made out no brief for herself. She confessed that she had been provoked at Karl Arthur and had chaffed him, but such a thing as breaking with him had never entered her mind.

Further, she related the morning's conversation in the dining room; told of Karl Arthur's extraordinary announcement, that he was now engaged to a Dalar woman; of how she had tried to win him back and nearly succeeded, when, suddenly, all was lost through the unfortunate arrival of the bouquet. She also mentioned the crazy note Karl Arthur had sent her, and apprised the Baroness of the decision she had come to, in consequence, and expressed the hope that her dear mother-in-law would understand, since she had understood her from the very first.

There was but one course open to her. Someone—she knew not who—presumably one of the ladies in the village—had accused her of being double-faced, designing, and mercenary. This she could not let pass unchallenged. As she was a poor girl, eating the bread of others, and had neither father nor brother to come to her defense, she must seek justice herself.

But, then, she was quite able to settle this affair. She was not one of the usual meek womenfolk who only know how to ply a broom or a needle; she could also load a gun, and fire it, too. At the last autumn hunt it was she who had brought down the biggest stag.

Courage she lacked least of all. Once, at a fair, she had given a blackleg a sound box on the ear for maltreating his horse. Though expecting that he would draw his knife and slash her, she had whacked him.

The Baroness perhaps remembered how once, on a St. Stephen's Day, she had jeopardized her social standing by surreptitiously taking the Dean's precious horses out of the stable in order to drive in a race with the farmer's men. Not many would have ventured to do that.

Moreover, she had made an enemy for life of that sinister fellow, Captain Hammarberg, by refusing to sit next to him as his table companion at a dinner party. Nothing would have induced her to sit through a long function and talk to a man who, shortly before, had ruined a good friend at cards and driven him to suicide. When she had dared as much as that because of a thing which was none of her affair, surely she need not hesitate in a matter that concerned herself.

She had the feeling that the creature who had maligned her to Karl Arthur was so vile she must taint the very air she breathed, and work harm wherever she moved. Listening to her talk was like being stung by a venomous reptile. One could render one's fellows no greater service than to rid them of such a monster.

After she had read Karl Arthur's note and grasped its meaning, she knew what she must do. She must go up to her room at once and fetch her shotgun. The gun was loaded, she had only to take it down from the wall and shoulder it. No one at the deanery would hinder her. She would call her dog and go down toward the lake, as if to see whether the young ducks were grown. When far enough away not to be seen from the house, she would turn in the direction of the village; for it was there, of course, the "person" lived who had dripped the poison into Karl Arthur's ear. She would halt before the house where the creature lived and call her out; the moment the ogre appeared, she would aim straight at her heart and shoot her dead.

Had she only known which one among all the women in the village was the culprit, this punishment would have been administered already. Now she had to wait for certain knowledge. She had thought for a moment of doing as Karl Arthur had done—simply go out with her gun in the hope that Providence would send the right woman across her path; in which case the real criminal might have gone scot free. And she did not mean to let that happen.

Nor would it have profited her to go down to the wing and ask Karl Arthur with whom he had talked the previous evening. She had sense enough to know that he would not have enlightened her. Therefore, she had decided to use stratagem; she would assume a calm and indifferent demeanour, and by that means draw the secret from him.

She had immediately pulled herself together, gathered up the remnants of Schagerström's bouquet which, in her bewilderment, she had plucked to pieces, and cast them into the dustbin; she had also picked up the engagement ring Karl Arthur had returned, whereupon she had gone to her room.

It being then only half-past eight, and some little time until breakfast, when she would see Karl Arthur at table, she was writing to her dear mother-in-law.

By the time her letter reached Karlstad, all would be over. Though determined as ever to carry out her resolution, she was glad of the delay, since it afforded her an opportunity to explain matters to the one person whose judgment she valued, and to tell her that, in all the ups and downs of life, her heart was ever with her wonderful, her adorable mother. . . .

The letter was finished, and Charlotte was reading it over. Yes, it was quite clear and legible. She hoped the Baroness would understand that she was innocent; that she had been unjustly accused and had a right to punish the offender.

While reading, she saw that, in her desire to establish her own innocence, she had shown Karl Arthur in a far from enviable light. She read on and on in a frenzy of nervous apprehension. Supposing that what she had written should make the Colonel and the Baroness wroth with Karl Arthur? Only a short while before, she had warned him not to incur the wrath of his parents, yet here she sat working them up against him!

She was extolling herself at his expense; she had been magnanimous and reasonable while he had acted like a wild lunatic. And this she had thought to send to his mother; to her who loved him! She, too, must be stark mad! Would she bring such sorrow upon her dear mother-in-law? Had she quite forgotten how indulgent his mother had been toward her at the time of their first meeting, and, indeed, ever since? Had she no compassion?

She tore the long letter in two, and sat down to indite another. Now she would take the blame on herself; she would whitewash Karl Arthur. It was only right for her to do so. Karl Arthur had a great work to do in the world, and she should be satisfied to be able to shield him. Though he had broken with her, he was as dear to her as ever, and she must protect and help him now, as always.

Charlotte began the letter to the Baroness:

“May my gracious mother-in-law think not too ill of me——” Here she stuck. What should she say? Lying had never come easy to her, and the truth would be difficult to gloss over. Before she could think what else to write, the breakfast bell rang, and there was no time for meditation. She signed her name below the single line she had penned, folded and sealed the note, and dropped it in the post bag downstairs, before going into the dining room.

It occurred to her, meanwhile, that she need not bother now to find out who the “person” was. If she wanted the Baroness to believe her, if she really wished to take the blame on herself, then she could not punish anyone.

CHAPTER IX

UP AMONG THE CLOUDS

BREAKFAST at the deanery, when one had fresh eggs with *smörgås*, gruel with whipped cream and light fancy biscuits to dip in one's coffee such as were not to be had anywhere else in the parish, was usually the jolliest meal of the day. Then the Dean and his wife, refreshed by their night's sleep, were lively as a pair of youngsters in their teens. The lethargy of old age, which crept upon them as the day wore on, was now as if dispelled, and they jested with the young folks and with each other.

But that morning there was no banter. Both old and young were in disgrace, so to speak. Charlotte had grieved the old couple sorely by the way in which she had answered Schagerström, while Karl Arthur had offended them by absenting himself from meals the previous day without giving the slightest excuse.

When Charlotte came dashing in to take her seat (the others being already in their places), she met with a stern rebuke from the Dean's wife.

"Do you mean to sit down to breakfast with such fingers?"

Charlotte looked at her hands, which were dreadfully inkstained.

"Oh, dear, no!" she said, laughing. "Please forgive me, Tante!"

She hurried out and returned shortly with clean hands. She was not at all huffed by the reproof, though it had been administered in the presence of Karl Arthur.

The Dean's wife looked at her and wondered what was in the air now. "One day she hisses like a snake and the next she coos like a dove. Ah, the young people nowadays, one can't make them out!"

Karl Arthur hastened to apologize for his remissness. He had gone out for a long walk and, having got rather tired, had lain down in the bush to rest awhile, and fallen asleep. On awaking, he had found, to his surprise, that he had missed both dinner and supper.

The Dean's wife was glad the young man had the good sense to offer an explanation.

"Karl Arthur needn't be so shy," she said graciously. "We could have brought in a bit of food, though we ourselves had supped."

"Tante Regina is much too kind," Karl Arthur replied.

"And now," said the old lady, "you must eat a hearty breakfast to make up for what you missed."

"I assure you, my dear Tante, that I did not faint by the wayside. I dropped in at the organist's, and Fru Sundler gave me a good supper."

A wee bit of a cry came from Charlotte. Karl Arthur shot her a swift glance; at the same time, his face went red as a beet. Now, thought he, she'll jump up and say that she knew it was Fru Sundler who had accused her, and make a row.

But Charlotte never moved. She looked quite serene. Had he not known how much shrewdness there lay behind that smooth white brow, he would have said it shone by some inner light.

However, it was not strange that Charlotte's table companions were surprised; for, in truth, an extraordinary change had taken place in her. Yet, it could scarcely be termed extraordinary, since it was nothing but what we have all experienced at times when endeavoring, to the best of our poor abilities, to perform an irksome duty or make a personal sacrifice. Probably we went about it with poor grace; without enthusiasm or even the faith that we were acting wisely and doing the right thing; when all we expected, in return for our kindness, was still further complaint and misery. And then, of a sudden, we felt the heart give a bound of gladness; it began to move with the lightness of a dancer, and a feeling of satisfaction permeated every fibre of our being. We rose, as by a miracle, above our ordinary, mundane self; we became sublimely indifferent to all unpleasantness, aye, we were quite certain that hereafter we should go through life untroubled; that nothing could disturb the blessed, tranquil joy that pervaded us.

It was something of this sort that had come to Charlotte as she sat at the breakfast table. All the hard feelings—anger, resentment, wounded pride, outraged love—had been swept away by the great joy in her soul over having sacrificed herself for the one she loved.

At that moment there was nothing in her heart but tender affection and sympathetic understanding. All human beings seemed wonderful to her; she could not love them enough.

She sat gazing at Dean Forsius, a dry, spare old man with shaven chin, bald pate, a huge forehead, and small, keen eyes. He looked more like an old professor than a clergyman. As a matter of fact, he had prepared himself to enter the field of science. Born in the Eighteenth Century, when the world still raved about Linnæus, he had specialized in botany and had just been appointed Professor in Botany at Lund University, when he was called to the pastorate of Korskyrka. The parish for untold years had been shepherded by clergymen bearing the name Forsius. The cure had passed from father to son, as an entailment, and Botany Professor Petrus Forsius, being the last to bear that name, had been importuned to take up the cure of souls, and leave the flowers to their fate.

All this had long been known to Charlotte, though she had never before understood what a sacrifice the old man had made in giving up his favourite study. To be sure, he had become a very good dean; in his veins flowed the blood of many generations of clerics, and it was self-evident that he would perform the duties of his office as one to the manner born. But from various little signs Charlotte had noted, she thought he still regretted that he had not been allowed to remain in his proper sphere, and carry on his legitimate work.

Now that he had an assistant clergyman, the seventy-five-year-old Dean had again taken up his botanical studies. He went about botanizing and worked in his herbarium. Meanwhile, he did not abandon the parish to the mercy of the winds. He was very particular to preserve peace and not let dissension creep in to embitter the minds of the

people. This was why he had been so upset by Charlotte's brusque reply to Schagerström. But yesterday Charlotte had been quite a different person. Then, she had thought the old Dean needlessly anxious and fearful; but now she saw him in a new light.

And the Dean's wife . . . Charlotte turned her gaze upon the tall, scrawny old Fru, who was utterly devoid of external attractions. Her hair, which would not turn gray though she was almost as old as her husband, was parted in the middle and drawn down over the ears; then it disappeared from sight under a black tulle cap. The cap also concealed a goodly portion of her face, and Charlotte surmised that such was the intention for the Dean's wife had not much beauty of feature to reveal. Perhaps she thought it enough to show the eyes, which were like two round peppercorns, the two small tufts of eyebrow, the tip of a stubby nose, with its flaring nostrils, the wide mouth, and the high cheekbones.

She looked rather severe, and if at times she was a bit hard on her servants, she never spared herself. They used to say in the parish, "To be body to the soul of Fru Forsius was not an easy lot." She would never have been content to sit quietly on a sofa, embroidering or crocheting. It had to be rough work to satisfy her. She had never in her life indulged in anything so useless as reading a novel or thrumming on a harpsichord.

Charlotte, who at times had thought the old lady needlessly work-frenzied, could not now admire her enough. Was it not a praiseworthy thing never to spare one's self but to be untiringly active even in one's old age? Was it not commendable in her, this desire to have her house always clean and in order, and to ask no other boon of life than to be allowed to work?

Besides, the old lady was far from prosy. What an eye she had for the ludicrous! She could say things in a way that made her hearers double over with laughter.

The Dean's wife and the Curate, meanwhile, were discussing Fru Sundler. He had looked her up, he said, because she was the daughter of an old friend of the family—Malvina Spaak.

"Why, of course, of course." The Fru Dean knew all Värmland, and especially those of it who amounted to anything in a domestic sense. "Ah, yes, Malvina Spaak was an upright and capable person."

Karl Arthur then asked Fru Forsius if she did not think the daughter as admirable in every respect as the mother.

"Well, I can't say that she doesn't attend to her house," said the old lady, "but I'm afraid she's a bit light in the head."

"Do you mean that she's flighty?" questioned Karl Arthur doubtfully.

"Yes, flighty. No one likes her, and so I have tried to talk to her. What do you suppose she said to me one time, as she was taking leave? 'When Tante sees a silver cloud with a golden lining,' said she, rolling her eyes, 'then think of me.' Now whatever did she mean by that?"

As the Dean's wife was telling this, the muscles round her mouth twitched. It seemed so ridiculous that any sane person could think of asking her, Regina Forsius, to

look for gold-lined clouds!

She tried hard to keep a straight face, for she had made up her mind to be sternly grave all through the breakfast. But suddenly her face began to work; the eyes contracted, the nostrils expanded, the mouth flew open, and out rolled the laughter. Her funny faces and body contortions set the whole table laughing. Charlotte thought to herself: "You had only to see Fru Forsius laugh to like her. Then you did not notice how homely she was; you just felt thankful to the one who had so much fun in her."

* * *

After breakfast, as soon as Karl Arthur had left the dining room, Fru Forsius informed Charlotte that the Dean was to make a call at Stora Sjötorp during the forenoon. Though the young girl was still in a beatific mood, she became a trifle uneasy. She wondered if that would not tend to strengthen Karl Arthur's suspicions, but instantly dismissed the thought. She was up among the clouds, what happened down here on the earth was of small consequence.

At half-past ten, the large covered carriage drew up before the door. The Dean, to be sure, did not drive four-in-hand, but his two grayish-white Norway clippers with their black tails and manes, and his tall, well-set-up coachman, who bore his black livery with much dignity, were not to be despised. Indeed, there was no fault to be found with the deanery turnout save that the horses were a bit too fat. The old Dean was so tender of the beasts that he hated to take them out even on an occasion like this. He would have preferred to set off in a one-horse shay. Fru Forsius and Charlotte had promised to attend an eleven o'clock coffee party in the village that morning, to celebrate the Name-day of the apothecary's wife, and, since the road to Stora Sjötorp ran past the village, they could ride most of the way. As the carriage swung out from the gate, Charlotte turned to the Dean and said, as if it had suddenly occurred to her:

"Ironmaster Schagerström sent me a bouquet of lovely roses this morning before Uncle and Tante were up. If you like, Uncle, you can give him a word of thanks."

Imagine the surprise and delight of the old couple! This was a great relief to them. Now there would be no rift in the harmony of the parish. Schagerström was not offended, though he had cause enough to be.

"And you're only just telling us now!" gasped the Dean's wife. "Well, you certainly are a queer one!"

The old lady, however, was highly pleased. She wanted to know how the bouquet had come; whether it was prettily bound, and if, perchance, a note had been tucked in among the flowers, and much else of the same sort.

The Dean merely nodded and promised to convey Charlotte's message. At the same time, he straightened his back as one who has been relieved of a heavy burden.

Charlotte wondered if she had again said something indiscreet; but that morning she could not rest content until everyone was satisfied, in so far as it rested with her. She felt an ineffable need to sacrifice herself for the happiness of others.

The carriage stopped where the village street debouched into the main road, and the ladies got out. It was almost at the very spot where Karl Arthur, the previous day, had

met the pretty Dalar girl.

Charlotte on her visits to the church town used always to stop here awhile, to enjoy the fine view. The little lake, which was the middle point in the landscape, could be seen much better from here than from the deanery, where the ground was rather flat. Here they had a survey of all four shores, with their varying scenery. On the west shore, where they now stood, stretched mile after mile of fertile fields. That the land was fruitful was evident from the numerous small villages that dotted the plain. To the north lay the deanery, also surrounded by even, well-tilled grain fields. And beyond, to northeastward, was a tract of woodland through which ran a turbulent river with a foaming rapid, and through the trees peered black roofs and tall chimneys. Up there lay two large iron mills, which contributed even more wealth to the district than did the fields and the woodlands. Looking southward, all one beheld was a wilderness of low, wooded hills. The eastern shore presented a similar aspect, and that side of the lake would have looked drear and monotonous but for a beautiful manor house that a rich ironmaster had built him high on the slope of a ridge, in the heart of the forest. The white mansion, rising amid the tall, dark fir trees, was an impressive sight. By a clever arrangement of the park trees, an illusion had been effected. One seemed to be looking at a castle, with towers and battlements. This place was the pearl of the whole landscape. One would not have had it removed from its setting at any price.

Charlotte, whose mind was far above the earth just then, did not cast a glance toward the shining lake or the beautiful manor. It was the old Fru of the deanery, who was not much given to contemplating the beauties of nature, who stood gazing in rapt wonder at the scene.

“Stop a moment, Charlotte, and take a look at Berghamra. Fancy! Stora Sjötorp is said to be even larger and more beautiful. Do you know what? If someone that I’m very fond of lived in a grand place like that, it would make me very happy.” The Dean’s wife wagged her old head and folded her sinewy old hands almost prayerfully.

Charlotte knew quite well what the old lady was hinting at, and glibly rejoined:

“Ah, yes, it must be delightful to live back there in the pine woods, where no one ever comes. It is quite different from living as we do, by a great thoroughfare.”

The Dean’s wife, who liked to see people faring to and fro in the road, shook a finger at the girl. “Aha, you!”

With that, she took Charlotte’s arm and went on down the pleasant village street, lined on either side with almost palatial buildings. At the upper end, however, stood a few humble cottages. If there were any others, they lay tucked away along the wooded ridge, and could not be seen from the street. The old stave-church, with its tall, awl-like spire piercing the air, the courthouse, the parish hall, the large, gay tavern, the Doctor’s residence, the Judge’s house, which stood somewhat back from the street, two or three big farmhouses and the apothecary’s place, at the bottom of the street—all bore witness that Korskyrka was a prosperous parish; that the people were enterprising and progressive.

Charlotte and the Dean’s wife, walking arm-in-arm, thanked the Lord that they did not have to live here, where one had neighbours on all sides and where a person could not stick her nose outside the door without the whole town’s knowing it and wondering

where she was going. The moment they set foot on the street they wished themselves back at the deanery, where one was a free agent, and mistress of all one surveyed. They would be ill at ease, they said, until they were on their way home, and saw in the distance the sturdy deanery lindens.

When at length they stepped inside the door to the apothecary's house, they seemed to have arrived somewhat late. Mounting the creaky wooden stairs to the upper story, they heard a hum of voices over their heads like the droning from a beehive.

"Just listen to them!" said the Dean's wife. "To-day they're at it like a flock of magpies. Something must have happened."

Charlotte paused in the middle of the stairway. It had never for a moment occurred to her that Schagerström's suit, the broken troth, and Karl Arthur's engagement to the Dalecarlian had already become common talk; but now she began to fear it was just this they were discussing so zealously and in such strident voices.

"That blessed wife of the organist has been gossiping," thought Charlotte. "Nice confidante Karl Arthur has acquired!"

But she had no thought of turning back. She would not stand aside for a lot of gossip mongers even under ordinary circumstances, much less to-day, when she was wholly insensitive to all tittle-tattle.

A sudden hush fell upon the room where the Name-day celebrants were gathered when the late guests entered. Only one old dame, with index finger poised in the air, still held forth.

"And more, my dear," she shrilled to her neighbour, "what do you think happened the other day?"

They all looked embarrassed. No one had expected the ladies from the deanery to appear.

The apothecary's wife, meanwhile, hastened to greet the newcomers. Fru Forsius, who knew nothing about the break between Charlotte and Karl Arthur, felt quite unconcerned, though she perceived that something was wrong. Old as she was, her knees were supple as a dancer's. She made a grand *révérence* to the whole company, then went about, greeting each person in turn, curtsying to one and all. Charlotte, following in her footsteps, met with ill-concealed disapproval. Her curtsseys were not so deep as the old lady's; but at that art none could compete with the Dean's wife.

Charlotte soon noticed how everyone avoided her. When she had received her cup of coffee and taken a seat at a window table, nobody came to occupy the vacant chair opposite her. It was the same after coffee, when the women brought forth from reticules and work-bags their embroidery frames and crochet work: she had to sit there by herself, as if none was aware of her existence.

Round about her sat groups of women with their heads so close together that the laces and frills on their large tulle caps became entangled. And now they talked in low voices so as not to be heard by her; yet, now and again, she caught their incessant, "And more, my dear, and more—think what happened yesterday!"

And they said, one to another, that first she had given Schagerström No; then, regretting it, she had deliberately provoked a quarrel with her fiancé to make him break

with her. Such subtle scheming! Such diabolical shrewdness! All the blame was to fall upon him. None should say of her that she had jilted a poor man to become mistress of Stora Sjötorp. And her fine plan would have worked out successfully and she would have escaped all censure had the organist's wife not divined her evil intent.

Charlotte sat quietly listening to the babble with never a thought of rising to defend herself. The mental exaltation in which she had revelled since early morning was now at its zenith. She walked on air, so to speak—high above everything earthly.

All this venomous gossip would have been turned upon Karl Arthur had she not shielded him. From every quarter would have come: "And more, my dear—have you heard that young Ekenstedt has broken with his fiancée. . . ? Oh, one thing more! He rushed out into the road and proposed to the first woman he met. Do you think, my dear, that such a man should continue as pastor here at Korskyrka? [Buzz-buzz].—Oh, what will the Bishop say?"

Charlotte sat rejoicing in her heart that it was she and not Karl Arthur who had to take it all, when a thin, pallid little Fru came over to her.

It was her sister, Marie Louise, wife of Dr. Romelius. She was the mother of six children and had a husband who drank. Marie Louise was ten years older than Charlotte, and there had never been any close bond of intimacy between them. She put no questions, but sat down opposite Charlotte and went to knitting at a child's stocking. There was a determined expression round her mouth. It was plain that she knew what she was about, when she took her place at the window table.

And there sat the two sisters hearing this interminable "And more, my dear."

Presently they noticed that Fru Sundler was sitting with the Dean's wife, and whispering to her.

"Now Tante Regina will know of it," said Marie Louise.

Charlotte half rose from her chair, then quickly sat down again. After a little she said:

"By the by, Marie Louise, what was that about Malvina Spaak? Wasn't there some sort of prognostication?"

"Why, yes," replied the sister, "but I don't remember just what it was, only that some dire misfortune would befall the Löwenskölds."

"Perhaps you could find out what it was supposed to be?"

"Yes. I have it written down somewhere. However, it doesn't concern us—only the Löwenskölds of Hedeby."

"Thank you!" said Charlotte.

Presently, Fru Romelius, to whom all this slanderous talk was becoming intolerable, leaned forward and whispered to Charlotte:

"I understand. You are silent for Karl Arthur's sake. Oh, I could tell them how it is."

"Don't, for mercy's sake!" Charlotte enjoined in alarm. "It doesn't matter what they say about me, but Karl Arthur is highly gifted."

The sister understood the situation. She loved her husband, though from the first he had made her unhappy by his tippling. Still, she had the faith that he would straighten up and accomplish wonders in the field of medicine.

When at last the Name-day party was over and the guests were taking leave, fat Fru Sundler quickly stepped out into the hall, where the ladies had left their wraps, and helped Fru Forsius on with her mantilla and tied her bonnet strings.

Charlotte, who usually claimed the right to assist her old friend, meanwhile stood looking on. She blanched a bit, but said nothing. When they came out on the village street, it was the organist's wife, again, who rushed forward and offered her arm to the Fru Dean.

There was no one who tried Charlotte's patience so much as Fru Sundler; the girl of course thought she would be rid of the woman when they reached her house, at the top of the street. But when they had come that far, Fru Sundler asked if she might accompany them all the way to the deanery. It did her so much good, she said, to have a little exercise after sitting still such a long while.

The Dean's wife made no objection, nor did Charlotte say a word. Now the girl quickened her steps, keeping well ahead of the others, in order to escape the sound of Fru Sundler's oily voice and her irritating drawl.

CHAPTER X

SCHAGERSTRÖM

ON THE homeward drive from his unsuccessful courting adventure, Schagerström sat back in the landau, chuckling to himself. But for the coachman and the footman, he would have roared. It seemed such a huge joke that he, who had fared forth to confer a great favour upon a poor young girl, had been so thoroughly snubbed and taken down.

“But the girl was right,” he mumbled. “Gad! of course she was right. I can’t understand why I didn’t think about her being engaged before rushing off to propose to her. Ha! she was superb when she blazed out like that. Well, anyhow, I had this compensation for my trouble: the pleasure of looking upon beauty.”

What though he had made a fool of himself, thought he, he had had the satisfaction of meeting a person who was not awed by his wealth. Certainly, the young girl had not tried to ingratiate herself; she had treated him as if he were no better than a common tramp.

“That little girl has character! I only hope she doesn’t think too ill of me. Oh, I’ll be careful not to propose to her again; but I’d like her to know that I’m not such an unmitigated ass as to feel offended at her for the lesson she gave me.”

All afternoon he wondered what he could do to atone for his brashness. At length, he seemed to hit upon something feasible. This time, however, he was not going to rush ahead blindly; he would give thought to the matter, make the necessary inquiries, and not go blundering again.

Toward evening, it suddenly struck him that there would be no harm in his sending Charlotte now, at once, a little token of appreciation. It would be nice, he thought, to send her a few flowers. If she accepted them, it would be easier to get on a good footing with her. He immediately went out into the garden.

“Now, Ericcson,” he said to the head gardener, “I want you to make me up a beautiful bouquet. Let’s see what you have to offer!”

“The prettiest I have,” said the gardener, “are these carnations. We could use those for the centre, with a border of gillyflowers, then mix in a bit of mignonette.”

Schagerström turned up his nose. “Pinks and gillyflowers and mignonette! Why, man, they are to be found in any garden. You might as well offer me daisies and bluebells.”

It was the same with the snapdragon, the larkspur, and the forget-me-not—they were all too common.

Schagerström presently stopped before a small rose bush, thick with buds and full-blown flowers; the buds, in particular, were lovely.

“This I think rather pretty,” he said.

“But, Ironmaster,” protested the gardener, “it is the moss rose! And this is its first bloom. It rarely thrives so far north. You will not find another bush like it in all Värmland.”

“But that’s the very thing I want. It is to be sent to Korskyrka Deanery. There, as you know, they have all the other kinds of flowers.”

“Oh, to the deanery!” The gardener was delighted. “I’d like the Dean to see my moss roses, for he is a knower of flowers.”

And of course the poor roses were cut and sent. The sorry reception they met with at the deanery has already been recorded. But the one who, on the contrary, met with a cordial reception when he came next day to Stora Sjötorp, was the Dean of Korskyrka.

At first the spare little clergyman was a bit diffuse and ceremonious, though he, like Schagerström, was at bottom straightforward and unassuming. They soon saw that apologies and compliments were superfluous, and fell to talking as naturally and freely as a couple of old comrades.

Schagerström took occasion to make some inquiries about Charlotte. He wanted to know about her family, her circumstances, and, above all, whether her fiancé had any plans for the future. A curate’s stipend was hardly enough for them to live upon. Did the Dean know whether young Ekenstedt had any immediate prospects of promotion?

The old clergyman was astonished, but as the things Schagerström asked about were no secrets, he gave clear and direct answers. “The Ironmaster is a business man and goes straight to the point,” thought he. “Well, I suppose that’s the proper way nowadays.”

Schagerström then said that, as chairman of a board of foundry directors in the province of Uppland, he had the right to appoint the chaplain to the works. The salary, to be sure, was not large, but the parsonage was comfortable. The last incumbent had been well content there. Did the Dean think it would be a suitable place for young Ekenstedt?

Dean Forsius was never more surprised; but, being a wise old gentleman, he took it as a matter of course. He drew out his snuffbox, filled his large nose with snuff, dusted it with a silk handkerchief, put the box back in his pocket, then made reply.

“Ironmaster, you couldn’t find a more worthy young man.”

“Then the matter is settled,” said Schagerström.

The Dean was elated. This, indeed, was good news to bring home! Charlotte’s future had been a source of anxiety to him. He had the greatest respect for his curate, but thought it deplorable that the young man took no steps to procure a living that would enable him to marry. The friendly old cleric suddenly turned to Schagerström and said:

“You like to make people happy, Ironmaster, and you don’t do it by half measures. Come along to the deanery with me and tell the young lovers of the splendid thing you are doing for them. Come witness their joy. I envy you that pleasure, Ironmaster.”

Schagerström beamed. Obviously, the proposition pleased him.

“But perhaps my coming would be inopportune?” he said.

“Inopportune! That’s out of the question when one brings such tidings.”

Schagerström, about to accept the invitation, suddenly clapped a hand to his brow. “No, I can’t,” he said. “I have to set out on a long journey to-day. The travelling carriage will be at the gate at two o’clock.”

“Oh, Ironmaster, what a pity! But I understand that time is precious.”

“Orders for relays of horses have been sent out to the posting stations,” said Schagerström mournfully.

“Why not drive with me as far as the parsonage?” proposed the Dean. “My carriage is waiting, and we could start at once. Yours can pick you up at the deanery at any time you say.”

This arrangement was agreeable, and Schagerström, after giving orders for the travelling coach to proceed to Korskyrka Deanery as soon as the food bag and the other luggage for the journey were ready, drove off with the Dean. The two men were merry as a couple of peasants driving to a country fair.

“I must say, Ironmaster, that Charlotte doesn’t deserve all this after the way she treated you yesterday.”

Schagerström burst out laughing.

“Now she’ll find herself in a tight place,” the Dean continued. “It will be fun to see how she gets out of it. You may be sure, Ironmaster, that she’ll do something quite unexpected—something that never would occur to anyone else.” The Dean chuckled with glee in anticipation.

It was a great disappointment to both of them when, on arriving at the deanery, they found that the Fru and the Fröken had not returned yet from the Name-day party. The Dean, knowing they would be at home soon, conducted Schagerström to his own quarters, on the ground floor.

Dean Forsius had two rooms for his special use. The outer, a bare-looking place, was his office. A large writing table, two desk chairs, a long leather-upholstered lounge, a wall shelf for the bulky parish registers, were the only furnishings, unless one included in that category some cactus plants, in a window, that looked as if they were aflame. The inner room the Dean’s wife had fitted up herself for the comfort of her “dear hubby.” The floor was covered with a home-woven carpet, and the furniture was both decorative and serviceable. There were upholstered sofas and easy chairs, a writing desk with many drawers and compartments, a rack for pipes, and rows upon rows of bookshelves. Besides, over both high and low, were bunches of pressed flowers in cap-paper wrappings.

It was in there, of course, the Dean intended to take Schagerström; but when they stepped into the office they saw Karl Arthur at the writing table, entering births and deaths in a big ledger.

The young man arose and was presented to Schagerström.

“To-day the Ironmaster will not have to go away from here without effecting his errand,” he said rather maliciously as he bowed to Schagerström.

And no wonder he was stirred on seeing the Ironmaster at the deanery! How could he help but think that the Dean, his wife, and Charlotte had conspired together to amend the hasty decision? Had there been a lingering doubt in his mind as to Charlotte's duplicity, the sight of the suitor, whom the Dean himself had brought to the house, would have been enough to confirm his suspicions. To be sure, it was no longer any concern of his whom Charlotte married, but he thought this haste rather indelicate and ruthless. That a clergyman should be so eager to procure a rich husband for a kinswoman was positively indecent.

The old Dean, unaware, of course, of the break with Charlotte, stared at Karl Arthur in surprise. He could not imagine what the young man meant by his remark, but inferring from his tone that he was inimically disposed toward Schagerström, he thought it best to let him know at once that the Ironmaster was not there to-day on any wooing errand.

He said: "It was to meet you the Ironmaster dropped in to-day. I don't know that I have a right to reveal his plan until Charlotte comes; but you will be pleased, my dear confrère, you will be pleased."

His friendly tone had no effect upon Karl Arthur, who stood there, stiff and frowning.

"If Ironmaster Schagerström has anything to say to me, he need not wait for Charlotte. We two have nothing more to do with each other." With that he put out his left hand to let Schagerström and the Dean see that he wore no betrothal ring now.

The old man wheeled round in his astonishment. "Look here, my fine confrère, is this something you two have decided to-day, during my absence?"

"Oh, no, Uncle; the matter was settled yesterday. At about twelve o'clock Ironmaster Schagerström proposed to Charlotte, an hour later our engagement was broken off."

"Your engagement broken?" gasped the astounded Dean. "But Charlotte hasn't said a word——"

"Pardon, Uncle!" Karl Arthur cut in, thinking the old man was trying to play the innocent, "but I see plainly that you have acted as Cupid's messenger."

The little old Dean drew himself up; he was now coldly reserved and formal. "Please step into my private office, gentlemen; we must go to the bottom of this."

Directly they had taken places—the Dean at the writing desk, Schagerström on a corner sofa at the far end of the room, and Karl Arthur in a rocking chair, near the door—the Dean turned to his curate and said:

"It is quite true, my fine confrère, that yesterday I advised my sister's granddaughter to accept Ironmaster Schagerström's offer. She had waited for you five years, young man. One time this summer I asked you whether you were going to take any steps that would make it possible for you to be united in the bonds of matrimony, and you said 'No.' You remember, perhaps, that I then told you I would do all that lay in my power to induce Charlotte to break off with you. The girl hasn't a penny to her name, and when I pass away she will be homeless and friendless. You know my sentiments, and I make no bones about having advised her as I did. But when Charlotte

followed her own sweet will and said No, the matter was closed. There has been no further talk between us on the subject, understand, my fine confrère!”

Schagerström, from his corner, was observing the Curate. There was something in the young man’s manner that displeased him. The fellow leaned back in his chair and rocked all the while as if he wished to show his superior that he considered his remarks not worth noticing. Time after time, he tried to interrupt, but the Dean went on talking.

“You may speak when I have finished, young man; you may speak then as long as you like; but I have the floor now. When I left for Stora Sjötorp this morning, I did not know of your broken troth. My errand there was not as you think, to offer Charlotte to Herr Schagerström. I went because I wish to have peace and harmony in the parish and because I thought Ironmaster Schagerström might reasonably feel cut up about Charlotte’s curt answer. But the Ironmaster seemed to take a different view of the matter; he thought my ideas old-fashioned and that Charlotte had answered rightly. In fact, he was so well pleased with everything that he wanted to do something for your welfare. He proposes to offer you the post of chaplain to the iron works at the Örtofta mines of which he is advowson. It was to talk this over with you and Charlotte that he came here to-day. Perhaps you’ll understand from this that neither Ironmaster Schagerström nor I knew that your engagement had been broken off. You have heard what I had to say, and now you may apologize to us for your base insinuations.”

“Far be it from me to doubt the word of my noble uncle,” said Karl Arthur, rising. Then, striking an oratorical posture of sorts—arms crossed over chest, back braced against bookcase—he continued:

“In view of Uncle’s candour and honesty I now perceive that Charlotte never could have thought of taking Uncle into her confidence in connection with her shady schemes. I must also say that my worthy uncle is right in that I am not a suitable mate for Charlotte. Had she, like my noble uncle, told me so, openly and honestly, whatever my own sufferings, I would have understood, and forgiven her. But Charlotte has chosen to go about it in a different way. Fearful perhaps of losing in esteem in the eyes of others, she at first proudly rejects the Ironmaster (not intending of course to scare him away for good), then makes me break our troth. Knowing the extreme sensitiveness of my nature, she takes advantage of this, and says things that she knows must infuriate me. She attains her object: I break with her. Now she thinks the game in her hand. On me she would lay all the blame. Upon my head she would bring down the wrath of my noble uncle and everyone else. What, I break with her who for my sake has spurned a magnificent offer? What, I break with her who has waited five long years for me? Who could wonder if, after such behaviour on my part, she accepts Ironmaster Schagerström? Could anyone blame her?” He flung out both arms in a grand gesture.

The Dean gave a jerk to his chair and half turned away from Karl Arthur. In the middle of the old man’s forehead there were five small wrinkles. During Karl Arthur’s tirade, these wrinkles began to redden, and now they were crimson as a fresh wound. That was a sign that the gentle Dean of Korskyrka was highly incensed.

“My fine friend——”

“Pardon, good Uncle, but I have not finished yet. When for the salvation of my soul I was compelled to break with Charlotte, God sent me another woman, a simple,

guileless woman of the people. Last evening she and I exchanged vows of eternal fidelity. I have been well rewarded. I am truly happy and do not stand here as one bemoaning his fate. But I see no reason why I should bear the hateful burden of public contempt Charlotte would cast upon me.”

Schagerström suddenly looked up. He had become conscious during young Ekenstedt's last remarks, of a change in the atmosphere of the room, and now he saw that Charlotte Löwensköld was standing in the doorway, just behind Karl Arthur.

She had come in so quietly that no one had heard her. Karl Arthur, unaware of her presence, talked on. As he dilated upon her artfulness and treachery, she stood there, sweet as an angel, regarding him with eyes of pure compassion and tender affection. Schagerström many a time had seen just such a look on the face of his own wife; knew what it signified; knew it to be genuine. He did not notice now whether she was pretty. To him, she appeared as one who had passed through a great fire unseared and unblackened, but with all imperfections burned away.—A glorified being. He did not see how young Ekenstedt could help but feel the warmth of her glance and how her love enfolded him. It seemed as if the love she irradiated filled the whole room. Schagerström could feel the power of its rays far back in his corner; and it set his heart beating violently.

The thought of her standing there and hearing all these preposterous aspersions made him writhe. He was about to rise when Charlotte, directing her gaze toward the dusky corner where he sat, descried him. She must have sensed his impatience, for she gave him a faint smile of understanding and put a finger to her lips as if she would have said, “You mustn't betray me.” Then she disappeared as silently as she had come. Neither the Dean nor the Curate knew that she had been in the room. From that moment a terrible fear possessed Schagerström. He had paid little attention to Karl Arthur's ravings, thinking they had to do with a lovers' quarrel that would adjust itself as soon as the fiancé came to his senses; but, after seeing Charlotte, he knew that a veritable tragedy had been enacted at the deanery.

Inasmuch as it was he himself who, by his thoughtlessness, had caused the trouble, he began to cast about in his mind for a way to reconcile the lovers. It meant establishing Charlotte's innocence; which should not be very difficult, he thought.

As lord of a manor and chairman of various boards, he had had considerable practice at reconciling warring wills.

Karl Arthur had just come to the end of his jeremiad when the heavy footstep of an elderly person sounded in the outer room, and in a moment Fru Forsius appeared on the threshold. The instant she caught sight of Schagerström she exclaimed:

“For goodness' sake, are you here again, Ironmaster!” It came out so simply and naturally, before she had time to pull herself up to anything more formal and appropriate.

“Yes,” said Schagerström, “but my luck is no better to-day than it was yesterday. Then, I came to proffer Stora Sjötorp, and now I'm here to offer a benefice.”

The Dean seemed to take fresh courage when his wife came in. He rose to his feet (the five small wrinkles still glowed fiery red), and practically showed Karl Arthur the

door.

“You’d better go to your room and think it over once more. Charlotte, I grant you, has her faults—the usual Löwensköld faults. She is quick-tempered and proud, but crafty or designing or mercenary she has never been. If you were not the son of my esteemed friend Colonel Ekenstedt——”

The Dean’s wife interrupted: “Naturally, my husband and I would rather side with Charlotte; but I don’t know that we can do so in this instance. There is so much that seems incomprehensible. In the first place, I can’t make out why she has said nothing to us about this. Nor do I understand why she seemed so pleased when my husband went to Stora Sjötorp this morning, or why she sent greetings by him to Ironmaster Schagerström, and thanks for his roses, when she knew what Karl Arthur thought of her. But I wouldn’t pass censure on her merely for that; there’s something else.”

“What else?” questioned the Dean irritably.

“Why is she silent?” countered the wife. “At the Name-day party, everyone knew of the broken troth and of Herr Schagerström’s suit. Some drew away from her, others were positively hateful; yet she took it all without a protest. Had she dashed her coffee cup in the face of one of those tabby cats, I would have thanked my Lord and Maker; but she sat there, meek as a martyr, and let them be as cruel as ever they would.”

“But, surely,” said the Dean, “you wouldn’t believe her guilty of a thing so despicable simply because she does not defend herself?”

“On our way home,” vouchsafed the wife, “I decided to put her to the test. The one who had been the most zealous in her condemnation of Charlotte was the organist’s wife, whom the girl never could abide. Well, I took Fru Sundler’s arm and let her see me all the way to our gate. Now, I ask you, would Charlotte Löwensköld have been content to let another lead me if her conscience had been clear? I’m merely asking.”

The three men were silent.

Finally, the Dean said in a toneless voice: “It doesn’t look as if we would get any clear light on this matter now; but Time, no doubt, will show us.”

“Pardon, Uncle!” said Karl Arthur, “but for my sake it will have to be cleared now. My actions must appear most unpriestly, most reprehensible, if people do not know it was Charlotte herself who brought about the break.”

“We might question *her*,” the Dean suggested.

“I require more trustworthy evidence,” said Karl Arthur.

“If I may put in an oar,” Schagerström now interposed, “I should like to suggest a way to clear this point. The important thing, I believe, is to ascertain whether or not Fröken Löwensköld wilfully tricked her fiancé into breaking with her so that she might accept me. That is the point, is it not?”

Yes, that was it.

“In my judgment,” said Schagerström, “it was all a misunderstanding. And now I intend to propose to her again. I am certain that she will give me No.”

“But will the Ironmaster take the consequences?” asked Karl Arthur. “What if she says Yes?”

“She will answer No,” said Schagerström emphatically. “And since it is plainly my fault that this misunderstanding has arisen between you, Dr. Ekenstedt, and your fiancée, I will gladly do what lies in my power to restore good relations between you.”

Karl Arthur smiled mistrustfully. “She will answer Yes, that is, unless she is forewarned in some way as to what is involved.”

“I do not intend to ask her in person,” said Schagerström. “I propose to write.” He went over to the Dean’s desk and scribbled these few lines:

Pardon me for troubling you again, Fröken; but having heard from your fiancé that your engagement is broken off, I now wish to renew my proposal of yesterday.

He let Karl Arthur see what he had written, and the young man bowed his head in approval.

“I would request that this be delivered to Fröken Löwensköld by one of the servants,” said Schagerström.

The Dean pulled the bell cord, and the housemaid appeared.

“Alma, do you know where Fröken is?”

“Fröken is in her room, your Reverence.”

“Then give her this from Ironmaster Schagerström and say that he expects an answer.”

When the maid had gone, silence fell upon the room. And now were heard faint droning strains from an old spinet.

“She is right above us,” said the Dean’s wife. “It is she who is playing.”

They were afraid to look at one another; they only listened. Now the maid’s step sounded on the stair; now a door opened; the music ceased. “Charlotte is reading the note,” they said to themselves.

The Dean’s wife sat shaking in every limb. The Dean had folded his hands in prayer. Karl Arthur had flung himself into a rocker. His lips were curled in a cynical smile. Schagerström looked unconcerned, as was his habit when an important business transaction was being concluded.

Now someone with light footstep crossed the floor up there. “Charlotte is just sitting down to her desk,” they thought. “What will she write?”

In a few moments light feet went trip-trip toward the door, which thereupon opened and closed. It was the maid who had just come out from Charlotte’s room.

Strive as they would to preserve an appearance of calmness, they could not sit still. All four were standing in the outer room when the maid returned and handed Schagerström a note, which he quickly opened and read.

“She has accepted,” he said in accents that plainly betrayed disappointment. Then he read out to the others what Charlotte had written.

If the Ironmaster wants to marry me after all the bad things now being said of me, I cannot do otherwise than accept the offer.

“Allow me to offer my congratulations,” said young Ekenstedt in his blandest tone of exasperation.

“But this was merely a test,” the Dean’s wife declared. “The Ironmaster is in nowise bound by it.”

“Why, of course not,” confirmed the Dean. “Charlotte herself would be the first . . .”

Schagerström was nonplussed.

Just then they heard the sound of wheels, and all looked out. It was the Ironmaster’s travelling coach drawing up before the door.

Schagerström said quite formally: “Will the Herr Dean and the Fru Dean please convey my thanks to Fröken Löwensköld for her answer? A business tour, long planned, compels me to be away for a fortnight. Upon my return, I hope she will allow me to publish the banns and arrange for the wedding.”

CHAPTER XI

THE LECTURE

“GINA, my love,” said the old Dean to his spouse, “I cannot understand Charlotte. I shall have to ask her to explain.”

“Why, of course,” his wife promptly concurred. “Perhaps I’d better call her at once.”

Schagerström had departed, and Karl Arthur had gone to his wing. The two old people were now alone in the Dean’s study. If they wished to hold a little inquisition for Charlotte, the moment was especially opportune.

“The one day she rejects Schagerström, and the next she thankfully accepts him,” said the old man. “Have you ever heard tell of such fickle-mindedness! Really, I must say a few admonitory words to her.”

“She has never cared what folks said or thought of her,” sighed the Dean’s wife. “But this has gone beyond all bounds.”

The old lady was moving toward the bell cord when the sight of her husband’s face made her stop. The five small wrinkles in his forehead still glowed like live coals, while the rest of his face was gray as ashes.

“My dear, I wonder if you’re quite prepared to talk to Charlotte now? She is not the easiest person in the world to cope with. Suppose you wait until this afternoon; that would give you time to think out some forceful argument that would strike home.”

The Fru Dean devoutly wished her dear lady’s-companion to receive a proper wiggling; but the husband was utterly exhausted from the long drive and the excitement he had just undergone, and she felt that he must not be subjected now to another unpleasant encounter.

Dinner was announced. This afforded them a good excuse for postponing the bout with Charlotte.

An oppressive silence prevailed throughout the meal. The appetite of the four table companions was no better than their humour. Platters and deep dishes were carried out as full almost as when placed on the table. The four sat at the board merely because it was the proper thing.

When, after the meal, Charlotte and Karl Arthur had gone their separate ways, the Dean’s wife insisted upon her husband’s taking his customary after-dinner nap. There was no special hurry about that lecture to Charlotte; she was in the house and he could talk to her at any time.

The Dean did not seem to require much coaxing. It would have been better, perhaps, had he taken up the fight at once; for he had no sooner finished his nap than a bridal couple appeared who wanted to be married by the Dean himself. That matter kept him occupied until tea time. Just after tea, the district bailiff dropped in for a game of backgammon, and the two old gentlemen sat rattling their dice till bedtime.

The next morning the Dean looked quite hale and fit. Now, surely, there was nothing to hinder his bringing Charlotte to book.

But, alas! in the middle of the forenoon the wife discovered that her husband had gone to weeding a garden patch where the thistles were getting control. She promptly hurried out to him.

“Yes, yes, I know you think I ought to talk to Charlotte,” he said the instant he caught sight of his wife. “Well, I have it in mind all the while. Oh, I’ll read her a lecture such as she has never heard in all her life!”

The Dean’s wife, with a sigh of relief, went back to her kitchen. She had her hands full just then. It was the middle of July, and there were the spinach to be salted, the peas to be dried, and the raspberries to be boiled down for preserve and syrup.

“Oh, dear!” she said, “he is spinning out a long sermon. But that’s the way of preachers; they waste altogether too much eloquence on us poor sinners.”

Despite her multifarious duties, she kept a watchful eye on Charlotte, to see that the girl got into no mischief. But this policing was hardly necessary. Early on Monday, before Schagerström appeared at the deanery and caused all this trouble, she had set about cutting carpet rags. She and the Dean’s wife had brought down from the attic a lot of old dresses and other useless garments that were only fit for rags, and taken them to the pantry, where all work that made litter, and therefore was not to be performed in any of the fine, dust-free rooms, was done. The whole afternoon of Tuesday and all day Wednesday Charlotte sat there, cutting, cutting. She never stepped outside the door. It was almost as if she had sentenced herself to penal servitude.

“She may as well sit there,” thought the Dean’s wife, “for she doesn’t deserve anything better.”

The old lady also kept an eye on her husband. He stuck to his garden patch, and did not send for Charlotte. “Petrus must be preparing a sermon that will last a couple of hours. Charlotte certainly has behaved badly; but now I’m beginning to feel almost sorry for her.”

The forenoon passed and nothing had been done in the matter. Then followed, in their usual order, the dinner, the forty winks, tea, the game of backgammon, and bed.

That night, as the old couple lay side by side in their big four-poster, the Dean ventured an excuse for the delay.

“Indeed,” said he, “it is not an easy thing, this business of lecturing Charlotte! So many memories crowd in upon one.”

“Never mind about the past,” said his wife. “I know you’re thinking of the time when she and the stable boy rode your horses of nights because she thought they were getting too fat. Put all that out of your head. Only see that we find out whether Charlotte induced Karl Arthur to break off the engagement. Everything hangs on that. You may as well know that already people have begun to wonder at our allowing Charlotte to remain in our house.”

The Dean chuckled as he said: “Aye, Charlotte did me a real service that time when she went riding of nights, and when she wanted me to have the pleasure of seeing that my horses were as good runners as any.”

“Ah!” sighed the wife, “we’ve had a deal to contend with in that girl. But it’s all forgiven now, and forgotten.”

“Of course, of course,” said the Dean. “But there are some things that I cannot forget. Do you remember how it was with us seven years ago, when Charlotte lost both father and mother and we had to take her? Then, Gina, my love, you didn’t look as you do now. You were like an old woman of eighty, so feeble you could scarcely drag yourself about. Every day I was afraid I might lose you.”

She knew at once to what he referred. The day the Dean’s wife turned sixty-five, she decided that she had been a household drudge long enough and would have a housekeeper. And an excellent person she found, too, who relieved her of all responsibility; the woman did not even want her to set foot in her own kitchen. The Dean’s wife, meanwhile, was failing rapidly; she felt weak and tired and was strangely depressed and unhappy. She actually thought her time had come.

“Yes,” said she, “it’s the truth that I felt rather poorly when Charlotte came, although I was leading a lazy life. Charlotte couldn’t get on with the housekeeper, and on Saint Lucia Day, at the height of the Christmas rush, what did she do but tweak the housekeeper’s nose! The woman, of course, left in a huff, and I, sick as I was, had to go out to the brewhouse and put the dried stockfish to soak in lye. No, that I shall never forget!”

“Nor should you,” laughed the Dean. “Gina, my love, you’re an old work horse; you perked up as soon as you were back in harness. I can’t deny that Charlotte has been rather daring and troublesome; but with that nose-tweak she saved your life.”

“And what of yourself?” The old lady did not relish this talk about her being so fond of domestic drudgery that she could not live without it. “You would have been in your grave by this but for Charlotte’s falling off the bench in church that Sunday.”

The Dean understood. When Charlotte came to live at the deanery, he was performing all the pastoral duties himself and preaching, besides, every Sunday. The wife had nagged and nagged at him to get an assistant. She had seen how he was wearing himself out and how unhappy he was because he could not find time to devote to his beloved science. Charlotte, however, did not nag at him; she simply went to sleep one Sunday during his sermon, and slept so soundly, too, that she rolled off the bench, to the consternation of the whole church. Naturally, the Dean was shocked; but in that moment he knew that he was too old to preach. Then at last he took on a curate; was relieved of a lot of routine work, and got a new lease on life.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “by that little ruse, Charlotte has given me quite a number of good years. It’s just this that comes between when I want to scold her, and I can’t get anywhere with that lecture.”

The Dean’s wife slyly brushed a tear from the corner of her eye, but made no answer. She felt, however, that this time it would not do to let Charlotte escape a reprimand. After a little, she said:

“That’s all very well; but do you mean to say that you are not going to find out whether it was Charlotte who broke the engagement?”

“When one can’t see one’s way clearly, it is best to stand still and wait,” said the old man. “That, I think, is what we must do in this case, you and I.”

“But you can’t stand for Schagerström’s marrying Charlotte, if she’s the sort people say she is.”

“If Schagerström should come and question me, I know what I’d say to him.”

“Now, what would you say?”

“I’d say to him that, if I were fifty years younger and unmarried——”

“What!” shrieked the wife, and sat bolt-upright.

“Yes,” said the Dean, unabashed, “I’d tell him that were I fifty years younger, and single, and I met a girl like Charlotte, so chock full of life and with a certain something about her that’s different—I’d propose to her myself.”

“Yi, yi! You and Charlotte!—Ha! but you’d have a merry time.” With arms waving and face working, the old lady threw herself back on her pillow and laughed.

The Dean regarded her with slight indignation, but she went on laughing. Soon he was laughing, too. They laughed till the tears ran down their faces; it was long past midnight before they finally cuddled down to sleep.

CHAPTER XII

SHORN LOCKS

LATE in the evening of Thursday, Baroness Ekenstedt came to the deanery. She ordered her coachman to pull up at the door, but did not step out of the carriage. She bade the housemaid, who had hastened out to assist her, ask her mistress to please step to the porch; she merely wished to have a word with her.

Fru Forsius immediately appeared, curtsying and smiling a smile that went from ear to ear. This was indeed a pleasant surprise! Would not her dear Beata come in and rest after her long, tiresome journey?

Oh, there was nothing the Baroness desired more, but first she must know whether that dreadful person was still in the house.

The Dean's wife appeared not to understand. "Do you mean that poor cook we had last time you were here? She left long ago. Now you shall have some *real* food."

But the Baroness kept to her carriage. "Don't pretend ignorance, Gina! You know well enough that I mean that wicked baggage Karl Arthur has been engaged to. I wish to know whether she is still in your house."

This the Dean's wife could not ignore. Whatever she may have thought of Charlotte deep down in her heart, she was ready to defend any member of her household against all the rest of the world.

"Pardon me, Beata," she said, "but one who for seven years has been as a daughter to Petrus and me, we do not throw to the wolves. For that matter, nobody knows what is at the bottom of it all."

"I have a letter from my son, a letter from Thea Sundler, and one from herself," said the Baroness. "To me, at least, it is all quite clear."

"If you have a letter from the girl herself that shows her to be at fault, then, by Gad, you shall not go from here until I've seen it!" The old lady was so astonished and excited that she actually swore. Now she advanced toward the stubborn little Baroness, who quickly shrank back under cover; for it looked as if the old lady meant to lift her bodily out of the vehicle.

"Drive on!" the Baroness shouted to the coachman. "For pity's sake, drive on!"

Just then Karl Arthur emerged from the wing; he had heard his mother's voice, and came running toward the main building.

It was a most affectionate meeting. The Baroness flung her arms about her son and kissed him violently, as if he had just rescued her from the peril of sudden death.

"But, Mother, aren't you going to step out?" said Karl Arthur, to whom this osculatory demonstration before the coachman and the groom was a trifle embarrassing.

"No!" declared the Baroness. "I cannot sleep under the same roof with the person who has so shamefully deceived you. Get in with me, and we'll drive to the inn."

“Now, don’t be childish, Beata!” said the Dean’s wife, who by this time had regained her composure. “If you will stop, I promise that you’ll not see a sign of Charlotte.”

“Still, I should feel that she was in the house.”

“People have quite enough to chatter about already. Shall they also have this to spread abroad—that you would not stop with us?”

“Of course you’ll stop here, Mother,” Karl Arthur decided. “I see Charlotte every day, and it doesn’t affect me in the least.”

With this reassurance from her son, the Baroness looked about as if seeking a way out. Suddenly she pointed to the wing where the son had his quarters.

“May I stop down there with you, Karl Arthur? If I knew you were in the next room, perhaps I wouldn’t be thinking of that terrible creature.” Turning to the Dean’s wife, she said: “My dear Regina, if you really wish me to stay, then put me in the wing. You needn’t go to any trouble; a bed, just a bed, is all I require.”

“I can’t see why you wouldn’t as soon occupy the guest room, as usual,” grumbled the Fru Dean. “But anything rather than have you go.” She felt quite put out. As the carriage rolled toward the wing, she muttered something to the effect that that Beata Ekenstedt, with all her fine airs, was no lady. Returning to the dining room, she saw Charlotte standing by the open window. The girl must have overheard it all.

“You heard, I suppose, that she does not wish to see you; that she won’t sleep under the same roof with you?”

Charlotte, who had not been so happy in a long while as when she witnessed the affectionate meeting between mother and son, stood there pleased and smiling. She knew now that her sacrifice had not been in vain. She said with the utmost calmness: “I must keep out of her way, then,” and left the room.

The Dean’s wife, fairly choking with ire, rushed into her husband’s study. “What do you think of this?” said she. “Karl Arthur and the organist’s wife must be right, after all. She hears that Beata Ekenstedt won’t sleep under the same roof with her, yet she smiles and looks as pleased as if she had just been crowned Queen of Spain.”

“Now, now, my love!” soothed the Dean. “Rest easy a little longer! Forgiveness looms on the horizon. I’m sure the Baroness will help us out of our trouble.”

The old lady was afraid her dear Petrus, who hitherto, by the grace of God, had retained his mental powers, was beginning to pass into his second childhood. That hare-brained Beata Ekenstedt, how would she be able to help them?

The Dean’s words had only made her the more dejected. She went out to the kitchen and ordered the maid to make up a bed in the wing for the Baroness, and sent her a supper tray; whereupon she went to her room.

“She’d better have her meals down there,” thought the old lady, “where she can sit and baby her son to her heart’s content. I thought she had come to give him a good dressing down for his new troth, but she only pets and humours him the more. If she thinks she’ll have any joy of him by such indulgence . . .”

In the morning, both mother and son appeared at the breakfast table. Her ladyship was in excellent humour, and conversed with her hosts in a delightfully amiable way. But the Dean's wife, now seeing the Baroness in the full light of day, thought her faded and wraith-like. Though Fru Forsius was the older by many years, she looked hale and hardy by comparison.

"Poor soul! She is not so happy as she pretends to be."

When they had breakfasted, the Baroness sent Karl Arthur to the village to fetch Fru Sundler, with whom she wished to speak. The Dean went to his study, and the ladies were left to themselves. The Baroness immediately began to speak of her son.

"Ah! my dear Gina, I can't tell you how happy I am! I came away from home directly I received Karl Arthur's letter. I expected to find him in the depths of despair, and perhaps contemplating suicide, but I find him quite content and supremely happy. Wonderful, isn't it, after such a shock?"

"Aye, he quickly consoled himself," rejoined the Dean's wife drily.

"Yes, I know . . . that Dalar girl . . . a passing fancy, nothing more, a lozenge one puts into one's mouth to take away a bad taste. How would a man of Karl Arthur's habits be able to endure a person of that sort for long?"

"I have seen her," said the Dean's wife, "and I can tell you, Beata, that she's a perfectly gorgeous female."

The Baroness blanched, but only for a second, whereupon she said: "The Colonel and I have decided to treat the matter as a bagatelle. We shall not refuse our consent. The poor boy has been so cruelly betrayed. Naturally, he was wild with grief. If we don't drive him on by opposition, he will soon forget that little plaything."

The Dean's wife for once had taken to knitting with a frenzy that set the needles rattling. It was the only way in which she could maintain her equanimity while listening to all this foolishness. "My dear friend Beata," she said in her mind, "aren't you supposed to be an intelligent and gifted person? Yet you fail to see that this is all wrong." Her nostrils dilated, the wrinkles round her eyes quivered, but she controlled her desire to laugh. Now she felt very sorry for the Baroness. Aloud she said: "Yes, children are like that nowadays; they can't tolerate any opposition from their parents."

"We have made mistakes before in respect to Karl Arthur," the Baroness confessed. "We were against his entering the ministry. It was futile, and only estranged him from us. We intend to take no stand against his engagement to the Dalar woman. You see, we don't want to lose him altogether."

The Dean's wife raised her eyebrows so that they nearly touched the edge of her hair. "Well, I must say, it is very sweet of you."

The Baroness then vouchsafed that she wished to consult with Thea Sundler on this matter, that was why she had sent for her. Thea seemed to be a sensible woman and very devoted to Karl Arthur.

The Dean's wife could hardly contain herself. The organist's wife, that poor, insignificant thing, and the Baroness Ekenstedt, a lady of quality, despite her eccentricities! She herself did not dare to reason with her son; that another must do—the organist's wife!

“Such little niceties no one bothered about when I was young,” she said.

“After the break, Thea Sundler wrote me such a nice, comforting letter,” said the Baroness.

At the mention of the word “letter” the Dean’s wife jumped to her feet and struck her brow with the flat of her hand. “Oh, that reminds me! Would you care to tell me what Charlotte wrote concerning this unfortunate affair?”

“You may read her letter, I have it here in the reticule.” The Baroness handed the Dean’s wife a folded note which contained the one short line: “May my gracious mother-in-law think not too ill of me.”

The old lady looked blank as she returned the scrap of a letter. “This leaves me no wiser than I was before,” she said.

“To me it is perfectly clear,” the Baroness rejoined conclusively.

It suddenly struck the Fru Dean that her guest had been speaking all the while in a singularly loud voice. This was not at all like her. But perhaps it was because she was all unstrung, and off her guard. At the same time it flashed upon her that, if Charlotte was still at her rag-cutting out in the pantry, she must have heard every word. That shutter in the wall through which the food was passed into the dining room was far from soundproof. The old lady had often complained that the slightest noise in the pantry could be heard in the dining room.

“What does Charlotte herself say?” asked the Baroness.

“Nothing. The Dean had thought to call her to account, but now he says it isn’t necessary. I know nothing.”

“Extraordinary!” exclaimed the Baroness. . . . “Most extraordinary!”

The Dean’s wife then proposed that they go upstairs. How very neglectful of her not to have thought of it before! Such a distinguished guest should not be sitting in the dining room like folk that drop in every day.

But on no condition would the Baroness be shut up in any of the rooms above stairs; which, to tell the truth, were not nearly so pleasant as those in daily use. She went right on talking about Charlotte in the same loud voice. What was she doing now, and where was she pursuing her work? Did she seem to be pleased at the prospect of marrying Schagerström?

Of a sudden, the old lady in a tearful voice sobbed out: “I have loved her dearly! I would have expected anything but this of her! . . . Anything but this!”

A pair of shears went crashing on to the floor of the pantry. “Now, surely, she can’t sit there listening to this any longer,” thought the Dean’s wife. “She’ll come rushing in to defend herself.” Charlotte, however, did not appear.

The painful situation was finally relieved by Karl Arthur’s return from the village with Thea Sundler. The Baroness, her son, and Fru Sundler immediately repaired to the garden, while the Dean’s wife went into the kitchen to grind coffee, crush sugar, and lay a tray; all of which might have been left to the maid; but she felt that it would rest her nerves.

She pondered, meanwhile, over the scrap of a note Charlotte had sent to Karl Arthur's mother. Why had she made it so brief? She remembered the girl's coming to breakfast one morning with inkstained fingers. Would she have daubed herself like that just scribbling the one line? She must have written another letter. And it was on Tuesday, the day after the Ironmaster had first proposed. Here was something she must ferret out. She sent the maid to lay the table in the lilac bower. They were to have eleven o'clock coffee that day, in honour of the grand guest.

"Charlotte must have written a long letter," thought the old Fru. What had she done with it? Had she sent it or torn it up?

She was preoccupied with these speculations during the coffee hour and, contrary to her usual habit, she was silent. Fru Sundler, on the other hand, chattered incessantly. She reminded the Fru Dean of the inflated toad in the fable, so proud and important had she become, because these aristocrats sought advice from her. Heretofore, the old lady had thought her merely a harmless fool, but now she felt that there was something malicious about her. "She arches her neck and gloats while the rest of us are troubled and unhappy."

But, of course, she poured her not only a first, but a second cup of coffee, and pressed upon her her choicest cakes. The rules of hospitality must be observed though it be one's worst enemy that is within one's gates. After coffee, the Dean's wife went back to the kitchen. The Baroness was leaving at two o'clock and, before that, she must have dinner. The hostess wished to supervise its preparation herself.

At one o'clock, Fru Sundler came into the kitchen to say good-bye. The others were still in the arbour, she said, but she must go home and prepare dinner for her husband.

The Fru Dean, who stood bending over the soup kettle, now put down the skimming ladle and accompanied her to the outer hall. She curtsied, asked to be remembered to the organist, and excused herself.

Thea Sundler, she thought, should have seen that she was busy; but there she stood for what seemed an eternity, holding her hostess's hand and saying how sorry she was for the poor Baroness on account of this new betrothal.

In that the Dean's wife accorded with her. Fru Sundler, pressing her hand hard, declared she could not go without asking how Charlotte was.

"She's right inside cutting rags," said the old lady. "You go ask her yourself!"

They were standing just outside the pantry. With sudden determination, the old Fru opened the door and pushed Thea Sundler across the threshold.

She thought: "It was this she wished. Charlotte has been stand-offish toward her, and she wants to see her now, humbled to the dust. The toad! I hope Charlotte gives her the reception she deserves. Ha, ha! I'd like to witness the greeting." She stole softly toward a door that led to the dining room, opened it gently, and, in a twinkling, she was over by the pantry wicket. By raising the slide a trifle, she had a good view of the small room where Charlotte sat, surrounded by piles of old dresses, some of which belonged to Fru Forsius; others had been left by the deanery ladies of former days. They had been sorted and cut according to colour—the greens by themselves, the blues by themselves, also those in figures and checks. On the floor lay mounds of narrow strips,

and in a box were large balls of strips, already sewed together. Obviously, the girl had not been idling.

Charlotte was so seated that her back was turned to Thea Sundler, who stood down by the door as if hesitating.

“So she has got no farther,” observed the Dean’s wife from her point of vantage. “This is a good portent. She’s going to have a pleasant moment!”

Fru Sundler put on a mien of condolence and, at the same time, encouragement, and said in the commiserating tone one employs when speaking to invalids, or convicts, or paupers:

“Good-day, Charlotte!”

The girl made no response. She sat with shears in hand, but had ceased cutting.

A faint sneer crossed the face of Fru Sundler baring for a second her pointed teeth. (That was enough for the Dean’s wife to see what she was.) In an instant, she was all sweetness and sympathy again. She took a step forward, then said with benign forbearance, as if addressing an ignorant servant or a refractory child:

“Good-day, Charlotte!”

But Charlotte never moved.

Thea Sundler now bent over her to have a look at her face. Perhaps she thought Charlotte was weeping because Karl Arthur’s mother would not see her. It happened that a couple of Fru Sundler’s curls brushed Charlotte’s bare shoulder, from which the wimple had slipped down while she was working.

The moment those locks touched her shoulder Charlotte came alive. Like a hawk after a hen, she seized hold of a bunch of the nicely dressed curls, raised the shears and snipped.

It was no premeditated act. The moment it was done Charlotte rose to her feet, rather aghast at what had occurred. The other sent up a shriek of horror and rage. This was the worst that could have befallen her. The curls were her pride; her sole claim to beauty. She could never appear anywhere until she had grown new curls. Now followed a succession of frenetic howls.

In the kitchen, adjoining, there was a deafening noise of crackling firewood, pounding mortar pestles, and boiling pots, which deadened her cries. The Baroness and her son could not have heard her from the garden. No one came to her aid.

“Well, what business had you in here?” said Charlotte. “I am silent for Karl Arthur’s sake. Do you think me such a fool as not to understand that it was you who created all the mischief?” With that she stepped to the door and flung it open. “Now go!” She made a clip at the air with her shears, which was enough for Thea Sundler to take to her heels.

The Dean’s wife cautiously closed the wicket, then clasped her hands and chortled: “Lord, Lord, that I should have been permitted to see this! Now my old man will have something to laugh at.”

Then, all at once, she became very serious. “The precious child!” she cooed. “There she has sat for days and allowed us to think evil of her! Now this must end.”

A moment later, the Fru Dean quietly stole upstairs. Noiselessly as a thief she entered Charlotte's room and went straight over to the porcelain stove. There she found some torn and crumpled sheets of notepaper.

"Dear Lord, forgive me for this!" she said. "Thou knowest it is the first time in my life I have read another person's letter without leave." She took the closely written pages to her own room, hunted up her spectacles, and went to reading.

"Aye, aye," said she, "this is the real letter. It was just as I thought."

Document in hand, she went downstairs thinking to lay it before the Baroness; but coming out she saw her guest sitting with her son on a bench outside the wing. How tenderly she leant toward him. With what love, what adoration she looked up at him!

The Fru Dean paused. "Never in the world could I read this to her!" she thought, then turned and went inside, to her husband's room.

"Here's some pleasant reading for you, old boy," she said, spreading the letter before the Dean. "I found this in Charlotte's stove. It was thrown in to be burned, but the blessed child forgot to set fire to it. Read! It will do your old heart good."

The Dean noted that she looked quite a different woman from what she had been during these last distressing days. She probably felt that there would be no harm in his reading the letter also.

"This is how it was, of course," he remarked when he had read to the end. "But why was the letter not sent?"

"The Lord only knows!" sighed the wife. "I brought it down to show to Beata. But do you know, when I stepped out on the porch and saw how she sat gazing at her son with that worshipping look in her eyes, it seemed best to let you see the letter first."

The Dean arose, stepped to the window, and looked out at the Baroness.

"So it was," he said, and nodded approvingly. "You see, Gina, my love, Charlotte could not send this to such a mother. That was why she cast it into the stove. She would not justify herself. Nor must we do anything in the matter."

The old couple sighed heavily; for now there seemed to be no immediate possibility of their establishing Charlotte's innocence in the eyes of the world. But, all the same, they felt wonderfully relieved. When they met their guest at dinner, they were in the best of spirits.

Singularly enough, the Baroness, too, must have undergone a similar change. Her gaiety was not forced, as it had been at breakfast. She looked positively rejuvenated.

The Dean's wife wondered if Thea Sundler had wrought this change in her. And she had, though not precisely in the way the old lady supposed.

The Baroness and Karl Arthur were sitting on the bench outside the wing when Fru Sundler came dashing out of the house, fleeing like a dove that has been in the talons of a hawk.

"What is the matter with your friend Thea?" the Baroness had asked her son. "Look! She is running and holding a hand to her cheek. For mercy's sake, Karl Arthur, run and intercept her at the gate! Perhaps she has been stung by a swarm of bees. Ask her if there is anything we can do for her."

Karl Arthur had hastened to do his mother's bidding. Though Fru Sundler had motioned to him frantically not to come near her, he had caught up with her at the gate. When he went back to his mother he was highly indignant. "Charlotte has been at it again," he said. "She is utterly ruthless. Fancy! When Fru Sundler went in to ask her how she was, Charlotte seized her by the hair and cut off the curls at one side of her face."

Whereupon, the Baroness had said with an impish smile: "What are you telling me?—Fru Sundler's lovely locks? Dear me, she must look a fright!"

"It was revenge, Mother," Karl Arthur declared. "Fru Sundler knows what Charlotte is; it was she who opened my eyes."

"I understand," the Baroness said. She sat quietly thinking for a moment, then turned to her son. "Let us not discuss Thea or Charlotte, Karl Arthur. We have only a few minutes left before my departure; so let us speak of you and your plans for the betterment of poor humanity."

Later, at the dinner table, the Baroness, as has been said, was her usual merry, entertaining self. She and the Dean's wife matched wits, they kept up a steady fire of quips and sallies and exchanged amusing anecdotes. Now and then, the Baroness would cast a glance toward the wicket in the wall. She wondered, perhaps, how Charlotte endured her solitude; whether the young girl who had lavished upon her an almost worshipful affection longed for her.

After dinner, when the travelling carriage was already at the door, it happened that the Baroness was alone in the dining room. In a second, she was over by the wicket, pushing it open. And there before her stood Charlotte; Charlotte, who all day had been sick with longing for just a glance from her eyes. Quick as a flash the Baroness caught the sweet face between her two soft hands, drew the girl to her and kissed her impulsively, whispering between kisses a few detached sentences.

"My precious child! Can you stand it to keep silence a few days, a few weeks more? It will all come right. Have I tortured you dreadfully? But I didn't know where I had you till you cut that woman's locks. The Colonel and I will manage this affair. Can you hold out awhile longer, for my sake and Karl Arthur's?"

There was a pull at the door, the slide went shut in a second. Shortly afterward, the Baroness was seated in her carriage.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHILD OF DESTINY

RICH Schagerström maintained that he would have been nothing but a lout and a rapscallion, except for a strange sort of luck that attended him throughout the early years of his life.

He, the son of wealthy and socially prominent parents, might have been reared in the lap of luxury and ease, as were his brothers and sisters; he might have slept every night in a soft bed; have worn fine clothes and fared sumptuously. But all that would have been fatal to one constituted as he was. Nobody understood this better than he, himself.

But, then, it had been his good fortune to be an ugly and awkward boy. His parents—the mother in particular—never could abide him. They could not imagine where they had got this child with the big head, the short neck, and the thickset body. They, themselves, were a stately, handsome couple, and their other children were perfect little cherubs. This Gustaf seemed to them a veritable changeling; and as such he was also treated.

To be the ugly duckling in a family of swans was no fun, and Schagerström readily conceded that many a time he had felt his position keenly; though in after years he regarded it as a blessing. If he, like the other children, had been coddled by a fond mother and told every day that he was a little angel, and had always had money in his pocket, it would have been his destruction. To be sure, his brothers and sisters grew up to be charming and estimable men and women. They, perhaps, had more character than he to start with, and were therefore better able to stand happiness; which in his case would have been harmful.

That he had been poor in Latin and backward in all his classes he counted as a special grace from the goddess Fortuna. Not at the time, perhaps, but afterward, since it had caused his father to take him out of school and apprentice him to an iron manufacturer in Värmland.

Here again Fortuna stepped in and so ordered it that he fell into the hands of a hard and parsimonious taskmaster who could give him the training he needed. Indeed, with him he had no downy bed to rest on; if there were a thin straw mattress over the hard plank bed bottom, it did well enough. With him he had to learn to eat porridge though burnt, and salt herring even when stale. With him he had to work from morning to night without compensation but with the positive assurance that a rap or two of the master's cane awaited him for the slightest negligence. Nor was all this pleasant while it lasted. But rich Schagerström could never be thankful enough to the Fates that taught him to sleep on straw and subsist on poorman's fare.

When he had served his years of apprenticeship, he was sent to a foundry estate near Filipstad known as Kronbäcken, where he became a clerk. Here he found a just and kindly employer. Here he ate at the family table, had good and bountiful fare, and received a small remuneration, enough to keep himself decently clothed.

He was now both pleasantly and comfortably situated. This might not have been well for him in the long run; but there was small chance of his being spoiled, for his old luck was still with him. Before he had been a month at Kronbäcken, he had fallen in love with a young girl, the foster daughter of his employer, Ironmaster Fröberg. That was indeed the worst that could have happened. The girl was not only ravishingly beautiful, talented, and popular, but she was also the heiress to foundries and mines valued at many millions of kronor. It would have been presumptuous in any foundry clerk to raise his eyes to her—especially in one who was ugly and taciturn; the “changeling” who never received a penny from home but had to shift for himself. Schagerström perceived from the first that the only thing for him was to keep well in the shadow, lest someone should see that he was in love. It was for him to sit still and look on when scores of young subalterns and young collegians came to Kronbäcken during the Christmas and summer holidays, to pay court to *her*. It was for him to clinch his teeth and control his fists when the others boasted that they had danced with her so and so many times in one evening; that they had received so and so many cotillion favours from her, and so and so many friendly glances and smiles.

He had small joy of his good position with this unfortunate love to worry him. It pursued him at his work on weekdays and at the hunts on Sundays. The only times he was at all free from the torments of love were when he sat reading about mines and the mining industry in a bulky tome he had found on the office shelf, which probably no one else would have thought to dip into.

Ah, well—long afterward he understood that this unhappy love had also been a discipline; though one to which he never became resigned: it had been too heavy to bear.

The young girl whom he worshipped was neither friendly to him, nor unfriendly. Since he did not dance and made no attempt to approach her, she had no occasion to speak to him.

But one summer evening, when there was a dance in the grand ballroom, Schagerström, as usual, stood down by the door following the loved one with his eyes. Never would he forget how astonished he was when, in an interval between dances, she came over to him, and said:

“Herr Schagerström, I think you ought to retire. It is now twelve o’clock, and you have to go to work at four. The rest of us can lie abed till noon if we like.”

He promptly betook himself down to the office; for he understood that she was sick of seeing him hang round the door. She had looked pleasant, and spoken in a kindly tone; but to interpret that as a sign of goodwill toward him and a feeling of pity that he should be tiring himself out needlessly, would not have occurred to him.

Another time, they were out on a fishing trip, she and a couple of the usual gallants, and he, Schagerström, sat at the oars. It was a hot day, and the boat was heavy pulling; but he felt happy because she was sitting in the stern, just opposite him, and he could gaze at her all the while.

Upon their return, as he helped her out of the boat, she thanked him kindly for the row; then she added, as if thinking that he might misconstrue her politeness:

“I can’t understand, Herr Schagerström, why you do not go through the School of Mines at Falun. A man who is the son of a Chancellor surely cannot be satisfied to be only a foundry clerk?”

Naturally, she had noted how, during the row, he had devoured her with his eyes. She knew that he loved her, and wished of course to be rid of him. He never for a moment dreamed that she was interested in his future; that she had learned from her guardian that he would make an excellent mining engineer if he only had the proper schooling, aye, and that she had also thought of a way to remove the social barrier between him and her—between the foundry clerk and the foundry owner’s daughter.

However, since she wished it, he wrote to his parents for financial assistance to enable him to study at the School of Mines, and actually received what he had asked for. It would have been pleasanter, perhaps, to accept the money had his father not written that he hoped his son would do better than he had done at the Klara High School in Stockholm, or if he had not conveyed so plainly that the parents thought he would never be anything but a clerk, were he to go through fifteen schools. But later he understood that such things only showed that Old Fortuna was working all the while to make a man of him.

It must be said that he did well at the School of Mines, that he took to his studies almost voraciously. His instructors were pleased with his progress, and he would have felt perfectly satisfied with his world but for the fact that every moment when he was not absorbed in study he was thinking of her down there in Värmland, and those who swarmed about her.

When at last he had finished the two years’ course (with honours to his credit, be it said), her guardian wrote and offered him the position of superintendent at Gammalhyttan, her largest and most beautiful foundry estate. It was an excellent position, better than a man of three-and-twenty could have expected. And Schagerström would have been overjoyed had he not known that she was back of the offer. He never supposed, of course, that she had faith in him, and wanted to give him an opportunity to distinguish himself. To him, it simply meant that she wished, in some nice way, to prevent his returning to Kronbäcken. She was not unkindly disposed toward him, for she stood ready and willing to help; only she could not stand his being anywhere near her, he thought.

He would have bowed to her will, and not shown his face to her again; but, before taking up his new duties, he was obliged to go to Kronbäcken for his instructions. When he appeared, Ironmaster Fröberg bade him go over to the house, where the ladies were, as his ward, too, had some instructions for him.

When he entered the small reception room where the ladies were wont to sit at their needlework, *she* immediately came toward him with outstretched hands, as if greeting a person for whom she had been fervently longing. He saw to his dismay that she was quite alone. It was the first time he and she had met when no one else was present.

That in itself made his heart beat violently; worse still, she said to him in her pleasant, forthright way, that at Gammalhyttan, where he was to be superintendent, there was a large, fine manor house, and that now, at any time, he could think of marrying.

He was too hurt to reply. So she was not satisfied with turning him away from Kronbäcken, but must also have him married. Ah! he did not deserve this; he had never been obtrusive.

She continued in the same straightforward way: "Gammalhyttan is the most desirable of my foundry estates. I have always thought I should like to live there when I marry."

That declaration would have been plain enough to anyone else; but Schagerström, who from early childhood had been under stern masters, turned to go. Before he could get to the door she was there, her hand on the latch.

"I have rejected many suitors in my day," she said; "so perhaps it is only fair that I should be rejected when I myself propose."

He brought his hand down hard on hers in order to pull the door open. "Don't trifle with me!" he said. "On my part it is serious."

"And so it is on mine," she answered, and looked him deep in the eyes.

In that moment Schagerström realized how well Old Fortuna had meant by him. All the loneliness, all the cruelty, all the privations which Life had hitherto brought him had been only that this divine happiness might enter his heart and find room there to spread so that It, and It alone, would be found there.

CHAPTER XIV

THE FORTUNE

WHEN Schagerström, in the third year of their happy union, lost his beloved wife, it was found that she had left a will to the effect that all her possessions, in case she died childless and before the husband, were to go to him. When the will had been probated and certain bequests to aged servitors and distant relatives had been paid, the administrators turned over to Schagerström his vast fortune.

That matter settled, there was a sigh of relief on all the Schagerström foundry estates. Everyone was glad that the property would not pass into strange hands. It seemed like an act of Providence that the numerous works were to be under the control of a capable foundry man.

But shortly after Schagerström had come into his inheritance, foundry directors, managers, supervisors, tenants, gamekeepers—in a word, all who had to do with the care of his estates—began to fear that the new régime would be anything but a blessing. Schagerström continued to reside at Stockholm, which was bad enough though it would not have mattered so very much had he only replied to letters. There was pig iron to be purchased, bar iron to be sold. There were contracts to be renewed for deliveries of coal and wood; vacancies to be filled; buildings in need of repairs, and accounts to be settled. But from Schagerström came neither instructions nor funds. Sometimes he would send a line to say that the communication had been received and instructions would follow; but they never did.

In just a few weeks' time, things were in a muddle. Some of the foundry managers sat idle; others undertook to act on their own responsibility, which was worse. Everyone now thought that Schagerström was not the proper person to handle this great wealth.

None was more displeased than Ironmaster Fröberg of Kronbäcken. Schagerström had been his protégé, and he had expected great things of him. Deep as had been his grief over the death of the happy, radiant young girl who had grown up in his home, it had been a comfort to him that her estates, which he had so long administered—these productive mines, these driving falls, these beautiful manors, these vast woodlands, these wealth-producing smithies and smelting houses—had come into good hands.

He knew that Schagerström was well qualified to take up his responsibilities as owner of a large property. On the advice of the guardian, Schagerström and his wife had spent the first year of their union in foreign travel. From their letters to him, the old man gathered that they had not wasted the time running about to art galleries or visiting old monuments. These two sensible beings had studied mining in Germany, manufacturing in England, cattle breeding in Holland. They had been untiring in their quest for knowledge. Schagerström had sometimes lamented their having to pass by the most glorious places without stopping to view them. "We think only of acquiring useful knowledge," he had written. "It's Disa who is the driving force; I, poor wretch, would like to live for love alone."

The last two years they had resided in Stockholm, where they had purchased a fine mansion and entertained lavishly. This, too, had been done at the suggestion of the guardian. Schagerström was now a *matador*, so to speak, and associated with the highest in the land. He had acquired ease of manner, made the acquaintance of influential persons, and gained the confidence of those in power.

Naturally, the Squire of Kronbäcken, though having nothing more to do with Schagerström's affairs, felt aggrieved. It was imperative that he should talk with Schagerström, learn what was wrong with him, and persuade him to knuckle down to business.

One fine day, he summoned a clerk, a young man who had come to Kronbäcken at about the same time as Schagerström, and who had been his good friend and comrade.

"Look here, Nyman!" he said to the clerk. "There must be something the matter with Schagerström. You're to leave for Stockholm at once, to fetch him here. You may take my travelling coach. If you come back without him, I'll discharge you."

Bookkeeper Nyman stood shaking in his boots. He did not wish to lose his good position. He was a clever fellow, though rather lazy; but he had managed to make himself indispensable to the ladies at Kronbäcken, by which means he had been relieved almost entirely from office duty. He played whist with the old Fru, read aloud to the young Mamselles, traced patterns for them, accompanied them on their riding tours, and was their faithful and obedient cavalier. "Obliging" Nyman—an appellation the ladies had bestowed on him—had to be present on all occasions when there was a question of diversion. Indeed, he was quite content with his lot, and had no desire to change it.

Nyman set off in all haste for Stockholm to save both himself and Schagerström. He travelled day and night, and in the early morning of the third day he arrived at the capital. He put up at a tavern, ordered fresh horses for the return journey, ate a hurried breakfast, then went straight to Schagerström's house.

He was informed by the lackey who answered his ring that Herr Schagerström was out. He gave his name and bade the servant tell his master that he, Nyman, had been sent here by Ironmaster Fröberg on a matter of importance and would call again in an hour.

And within an hour he reappeared, having come this time in the Fröberg carriage, with fresh horses and a well-stocked food bag—all ready for the journey to Värmland.

But, as he stepped into the vestibule, the lackey gave him greetings from Herr Schagerström, who, he said, would not be at home until later in the day. There was a conference keeping him.

The man's tone sounded forced, and he seemed embarrassed. Nyman began to suspect that the fellow was lying, and asked him where the conference was being held.

"The gentlemen," said the lackey, "are assembled in the grand salon."

Nyman now saw a long row of hats and overcoats hanging in the vestibule, so he removed his own hat and caped coat and handed them to the lackey.

"There must be some place here where I can sit and wait," he said. "I don't care to tramp the streets. I've been driving all night in order to get here in time."

It looked as if the servant were not going to admit him; but Herr Nyman insisted, and was presently ushered into a small anteroom just outside the salon.

In a moment, a couple of men passed through the room preceded by the lackey, who opened the door to the salon for them. Bookkeeper Nyman took advantage of his opportunity to peep into the conference hall. He saw quite a number of elderly gentlemen seated round a large table, covered with documents, which he noticed were written on stamped paper.

“What’s all this?” he wondered. “Those papers look like contracts and title deeds. Schagerström must be engaged in some big transaction.”

It suddenly struck him that he had not seen Schagerström himself at the conference table. If Schagerström took no part in the meeting, what was there to hinder his seeing him, Nyman?

A young man who was to attend the conference came into the anteroom. He was a secretary to the king whom the foundry clerk had met at Kronbäcken in the days when the secretary, like so many others, came a-courting. He rushed forward to speak to him.

“Well, well,” said the secretary, “if it isn’t Obliging—I mean Bookkeeper Nyman! Glad to see you here in Stockholm. All’s well at Kronbäcken, I hope.”

“Will the Herr Secretary please see that I get a word with Schagerström? I have come all the way from Värmland on urgent business.”

The man glanced at the clock. “I’m afraid Herr Nyman will have to exercise patience for a few hours, until the conference is over.”

“What in the world is he doing?”

“I don’t think I am at liberty to speak of it—yet.”

The bookkeeper thought of his pleasant position at Kronbäcken as all-in-all to the Madam and the daughters, and ventured a bold guess. “I know, of course, that Schagerström intends to dispose of his property.”

“Ah! then you have already got wind of it at the foundries.”

“Yes, that much we know, though we have not yet heard who the purchasers are.”

“Purchasers!” exclaimed the secretary. “There’s no talk of purchase and sale. The whole fortune is going to charitable organizations: the Freemasons’ Orphanage, widows’ pension funds, and other causes of the same sort. But, good-bye for the present. It’s I who must draw up the donation letters, when the gentlemen inside have agreed upon the terms.”

The foundry clerk swallowed and swallowed like a fish cast upon the shore. If he came home with such tidings, old man Fröberg would be furious, and he, Nyman, would be turned out of his desirable place instantly. He must hit upon something—but what?

As the secretary was disappearing through the open door, Herr Nyman caught him by the arm and said:

“Please tell Schagerström that I must speak with him. Tell him it’s important! Tell him that Gammalhyttan is burned down!”

“Why, certainly. Oh, what a misfortune!”

In a moment there appeared in the doorway a pale, emaciated man with bloodshot eyes. Turning to the foundry clerk, he said curtly: “What do you wish?”

Nyman again stood swallowing. He was speechless. So this was Schagerström! Though the Ironmaster was never a stately or handsome man, there had been something indescribably good about him in the days when he went about at Kronbäcken, filled with his love longings. But now his old comrade was almost afraid of him.

“You said something about a fire?” Schagerström continued. “Has Gammalhyttan been destroyed?”

The clerk, who had resorted to the white lie simply to catch the ear of Schagerström, thought it best not to show his hand for awhile.

“Yes,” said he, “there has been a fire at Gammalhyttan.”

“What has burned?—the manor?”

The foundry clerk scrutinized Schagerström, whose eyes had a glassy stare and whose hair had begun to whiten at the temples.

“It isn’t enough with the manor house,” he thought. “A rousing shock is needed here.”

“It’s worse than that,” he told Schagerström.

“The smithy?”

“Nor that either, but the big, wretched building where you had twenty families housed. Two women were burned to death and a hundred persons are without a roof over their heads. Those who were rescued haven’t a rag to their backs or shoes to their feet. The distress down there is said to be appalling. I haven’t seen it myself; I was sent to fetch you.”

“The manager has not advised me of this,” said Schagerström.

“It’s useless writing to you. Börjesson appealed to Fröberg for aid, but the old man thought it was too much for him; that you should attend to this yourself.”

Schagerström stepped to the door and rang for the lackey.

“I’m leaving for Värmland at once,” he said. “Tell Lundman to get the carriage ready.”

“Beg pardon,” said Nyman, “but I have Ironmaster Fröberg’s travelling coach with a fresh span of horses waiting outside the gate. You’ve only to change to your travelling clothes, and we can be off at any moment.”

Schagerström suddenly clapped his hand to his forehead. “The conference! It is really important. I can’t leave for a half hour yet.”

Nyman, however, did not propose to allow him time to give away his property; so he said:

“Oh, a half hour wouldn’t matter to us; but to those who are lying outdoors on the bare ground in the chilly autumn weather, it may seem long enough!”

“Why are they lying on the bare ground? They have the manor house.”

“Börjesson probably did not dare shelter them there.”

Still Schagerström wavered. And now Nyman said:

“I wonder if Disa Landberg would have stopped to finish a conference had she received such tidings?”

Schagerström shot him an impatient glance, went into the salon, and was back in a moment.

“I have just notified the gentlemen that the meeting is adjourned for a week. Now come!” he said.

* * *

It would be a sin to say that Bookkeeper Nyman had a pleasant journey faring toward Värmland with Schagerström. That fib about the fire troubled him greatly. He wanted to confess that he had lied, but did not dare.

“If I tell him there has been no loss of life down there and that none are homeless he’ll turn round and go back to Stockholm. It’s the only hook I have to hold him by.”

Nyman wondered if Schagerström couldn’t be persuaded to change his mind. And he let his tongue run. He recounted a lot of trivial incidents in connection with the foundries. There were old servants who had said amusing and apt things; there were wily coal haulers who had fooled green inspectors; there were rumours of rich finds of mineral deposits in the vicinity of Gammalhyttan, and there were graphic accounts of an auction at which great tracts of woodland had gone for a mere song. He talked as it were for his life. But Schagerström must have found Nyman’s efforts to arouse his interest in the property too obvious, for he cut him short.

“I cannot hold these estates,” he said. “I’m going to give them away. Disa would think I did not miss her were I to accept all that.”

“You should accept it, not as a joy but as a cross,” said Nyman.

“I can’t carry it alone!” Schagerström cried out in a tone of such hopeless despair that Nyman was afraid to pursue the subject.

The next day it was no better. Nyman had hoped that Schagerström would pick himself up when he got out into the country and saw fields and woods on every side; but there had been no perceptible improvement. The foundry clerk was actually alarmed about his old comrade.

“He won’t bear his cross long,” he thought. “As soon as he disposes of his wealth, he’ll lie down and die. The man is grieving himself to death.” And now it was not only to save his own skin but also to save the life of his friend that he tried once more to make Schagerström change his mind about his property.

“You should consider those whose labour has produced this wealth,” he said. “Do you think they have worked merely for their own profit? Oh, no! Their purpose in consolidating all this producing power was that great things might be accomplished which would benefit the whole province. But you want to cut up the property and give it away. Now, I call that conscienceless. In my opinion, you have no right to do it. You should take up your burden and attend to your business.”

The admonishment seemed to have no effect upon Schagerström; all the same, Nyman went on courageously:

“Come and work with us in Värmland. You are too good a man to be wasting your winters in Stockholm in idle amusements and spending your summers at the works just to kill time. Come and see to your property. I assure you it is necessary.”

The foundry clerk marvelled at his own eloquence. Schagerström smiled and said rather facetiously:

“Well, listen to Obliging Nyman!”

“Oh, I know I’ve no call to preach,” said the clerk, reddening. “I haven’t a penny to my name and can’t get anywhere; but I feel that I’ve a right to make life as pleasant for myself as I can. If I owned as much as a pinch of earth, do you think I’d part with it? No, no!”

The third day, at about six in the morning, they arrived at Gammalhyttan Manor. The sun beamed on the yellow and russet crowns of the trees, the heavens were gloriously blue, and the little lake in the distance peeped through a light veil of mist—smooth and shining as a disk of steel.

No one came to receive them, and when the farmer driver went down to the barn to look for the stableman, Nyman seized the opportunity to make confession.

“Don’t bother to question Börjesson about the fire. That was only a little ruse of mine to get you here. Fröberg said he would discharge me if I came back without you.”

“But those burned to death and those without shelter?” said Schagerström, who could not change the current of his thoughts so rapidly.

“There are no such!” the foundry clerk blurted out in utter dismay. “I had to lie to you to stop you from giving away your possessions.”

Schagerström eyed him coolly, as if the matter were of no interest whatever. He said: “No doubt you meant well, but it was all quite needless. I shall return to Stockholm as soon as I have ordered fresh horses.”

Nyman sighed but said nothing. The game was up, so what was the use?

The driver meanwhile came back and reported that there was not a man on the place. He had met an old woman who told him that the managers and all the foundry men had gone deer hunting. “The beaters-up went off at four this morning and, in the rush and confusion, the stableman forgot to feed the horses. The gentlemen can hear how they’re stomping.”

And, in fact, it was a deafening noise that issued from the stable, where the hungry horses were kicking up as much of a row as they could.

Schagerström flushed slightly. He handed a coin to the driver and asked him to give the animals some fodder; then, looking about with suddenly awakened interest, he observed that there was no smoke rising from the smelting house.

“The furnaces are blown out for the first time in thirty years,” Nyman elucidated. “There was no ore, so what could one do? Börjesson, with all his men, goes a-hunting, as you see, and I don’t blame him.”

Schagerström flushed a shade deeper. “The smithy—is that idle, too?”

“Certainly. The smiths, like the beaters-up, are out. But what’s that to you? Aren’t you going to give everything away?”

“Oh, yes,” said Schagerström weakly. “To be sure, it’s none of my affair what they do here.”

“It is the fine gentlemen directors of the Freemasons’ Orphan Asylum who’ll buckle to down here, and not you.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you care to go in?” Nyman asked him as they walked toward the manor house. “There was an early breakfast for the huntsmen, and the ladies and maidservants are having their sleep out after the pother.”

“You needn’t waken them,” said Schagerström. “I’m leaving immediately.”

“Hello!” shouted Nyman as a shot was heard. “Look!”

A stag came running from the park. It was wounded. One foreleg hung limp, dragging and flopping from side to side as the animal continued its flight.

In a second a hunter dashed out of the park and, with a well-aimed shot, brought down the game. The stag, roaring with agony, dropped a few feet from where Schagerström stood. The marksman, a tall man with a military bearing, approached slowly and as if with reluctance.

“It’s Captain Hammarberg,” said Nyman.

Schagerström instantly recognized the ruddy, fair-haired officer who exercised a strange power over women, who all liked him though they knew him for a scoundrel and a blackguard.

He would never forget how the fellow had tried to make up to Disa Landberg when she was a young miss; how he had cast a kind of spell over her, so that she allowed him to walk with her, ride with her, dance with her.

“How dare that wretch come here!” he muttered.

“Well, you don’t seem to be able to prevent him,” Nyman retorted in a tone that was far from “obliging.”

Memories crowded upon Schagerström. This captain, who must have surmised that Schagerström loved the young heiress, had tormented and ridiculed him; had boasted before him of his low intrigues, as if to make him suffer a double agony in the thought that Disa Landberg might get such a man for a husband.

“For God’s sake, come on!” he roared at the Captain, “and put the animal out of its misery.” Then, turning his back on the man, he went straight to the house and pounded on the door.

Manager Börjesson and the other hunters had now come back from the game park. The foundry manager, having recognized the Ironmaster, came rushing up on to the porch.

Schagerström gave him a withering look. “I’ll say nothing about the furnaces being blown out, the smithy standing idle, and the animals not being fed; this is, perhaps, as

much my fault as yours; but you alone are to blame for allowing that cur of a Captain Hammarberg to hunt on my grounds. And now, sir, you are discharged.”

With these words Schagerström resumed control of his estates. And it was a long time before he thought again of disposing of his property.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE DILIGENCE

WHEN Schagerström left Korskyrka Deanery after his second proposal, he was in no mood for laughter. The previous day he had come away from there highly edified, thinking that he had met a proud, high-minded woman; and now, since Charlotte Löwensköld had proved to be a sordid and calculating person, he felt utterly disheartened.

He knew, from the way it affected him, that the young girl had made a stronger impression than he cared to admit. "Thousand devils!" he muttered. "Had she stood the test, I'm afraid I should have lost my heart to her." But that was out of the question now that she had revealed her true character. He must marry her, of course; but he knew that he could never love a designing, untrustworthy, and mercenary woman.

Schagerström suddenly lowered the leather shades at the windows of the small closed carriage which he always used when making long journeys. The sight of the perpetual sunshine and the grain fields flaunting their rich harvests was a torture to him that day.

As he sat in the darkened carriage, with nothing to attract his gaze, there appeared to his mind's eye a vision of Charlotte as she stood in the doorway bending toward young Ekenstedt and regarding him with tender compassion. If ever love shone in a face, it did in hers.

"To hell with you! There you stood looking like an angel from heaven, and only ten minutes afterward you accepted rich Schagerström!"

A wave of self-contempt swept over him as he thought of how badly he had conducted this affair. He had stood up and vouched for a person merely on account of her beautiful eyes. Such credulity! Such stupidity! The whole episode had been an almost unpardonable indiscretion. Had he quite lost his reason? Were his parents right after all in their estimate of him? Certainly, in this instance, he had been clumsy and witless enough!

After a little, he began to regard his failure as a punishment. He had been unfaithful to the memory of his sainted wife; therefore, he must espouse a woman he could neither love nor respect.

Suddenly, all the old grief reawoke in him. He felt that in this grief he lived and moved and had his being. Life, with its manifold duties and perplexities, was actually repellent to him.

This time Schagerström had set out on a tour of inspection. He was to examine the managers' accounts; see whether the smithies, with their gaping forges and iron-bound hammers, were in good condition, and determine how much coal and pig iron should be ordered for the winter's use. It was a regular business tour, such as he made every summer, and therefore must not be neglected.

In a few hours, he was at Gammalhyttan, where his good friend Henrik Nyman was now manager. Of course both Nyman and his wife, who was one of the nice Fröberg girls of Kronbäcken, welcomed him cordially. Here he was greeted, not as a feared master but as an old comrade.

Though Schagerström could not have fallen into better hands, the melancholy mood into which he had sunk during the drive did not pass. Gammalhyttan, indeed, was the last place he should have come to as a newly affianced man. Every path in the park, every tree in the avenue, every bench in the garden held precious memories of tender avowals and tokens of endearment which had passed between him and his late wife. Here she still lived, young and radiant. He could see her; could hear her voice. Was it possible that he had been untrue to her? Was there a woman on this earth worthy to take her place in his heart?

His hosts could not help noting how dejected he was, and wondered what had made him so; but since he vouchsafed no explanation, they would not intrude upon him by asking personal questions.

Korskyrka being only a few miles away, it was inevitable that the news of Schagerström's engagement and everything connected with it would reach Gammalhyttan before the Ironmaster was ready to leave. The foundry manager and his wife, therefore, soon learned the cause of his despondency.

"He regrets it," they said between themselves. "But that is unfortunate. Charlotte Löwensköld would be the very wife for him; she'd pull him out of these perpetual megrims and broodings."

"I should like to speak to him of her," said Fru Nyman. "I know Charlotte of old. All this talk about her perfidy and craftiness is untrue. She is the soul of honour."

"I wouldn't meddle in this affair if I were in your place," counselled the husband. "Schagerström has again that staring look he had when I fooled him away from Stockholm, six years ago. It might be harmful, you understand."

The little wife carefully refrained from alluding to the matter during the greater part of Schagerström's stay. But on Friday evening, when the books had been audited and the guest was to leave the next morning, she could no longer control her kind and sympathetic heart.

"It would be cruel to let him go away feeling so sad and rueful," she thought. "Why should he be unhappy when there's no reason for it?"

With rare delicacy, and as if quite incidentally, during the evening meal she brought the conversation round to Charlotte Löwensköld. She recounted a number of current stories of the young girl; she told of her tweaking the Dean's housekeeper's nose; of her falling off the bench in church; of her racing the Dean's horses, and other things that were typical of her. On the whole, she pictured for Schagerström's benefit a proud, high-spirited, daring, and, withal, remarkably sensible and steadfast person. She tried not to suggest that she knew he had become engaged to Charlotte.

While Fru Britta Nyman was most eloquently defending her friend, Schagerström suddenly sprang to his feet and pushed his chair far out into the room.

“It is well meant of you, Britta,” he said. “I know that you wish to comfort me by gilding this wretched affair. But I prefer to face the unvarnished truth. It is only right that I who have been so heartless as to think of marrying again should have for wife a false and designing wench, than which there is nothing worse.”

Having delivered himself of this, he rushed out of the room. Immediately after, his terrified hosts heard the front door open and shut with a bang.

Schagerström wandered about the great forest, east of Gammalhyttan. He had been tramping for two or three hours, not knowing exactly where he was. Meanwhile, old notions that had been laid away these six years recurred to his mind. This encumbering wealth, which was to him a plague and a torment, why not cast it off?

Britta Nyman was right in a certain degree, he thought. Charlotte was no worse than others. She had met with a temptation that proved too strong. Why should he go about tempting people with his riches? Since taking control of his property, he had had extraordinary success; he had nearly doubled the fortune. All the more reason why he should rid himself of the oppressive burden. By that means, perhaps, he would escape a new marriage bond. Fröken Löwensköld would not care to wed a poor man. As he went stumbling round in the darkness, sometimes falling, sometimes standing still, he had as much difficulty finding his way in the brambly wilderness as in his own mind.

At length he came out on a broad, gravelled thoroughfare. It was the Stockholm Road, which ran eastward from Gammalhyttan. He began to tramp it. Was not this a leading from On High? Was it not a significant thing, his happening upon the Stockholm Road the moment he decided to give away his fortune?

He quickened his steps. Indeed, he was not going back to Gammalhyttan to be drawn into a discussion of his plans. He had money with him, and could order horses at the nearest inn. While trudging up a steep hill, he heard from behind the clatter of an approaching vehicle. Glancing back, he saw a big coach drawn by three horses.

The Stockholm diligence!—Leading number two! By that he could get to Stockholm more quickly. Before anyone at home had the least suspicion, he could convene another meeting and send out the donation letters. He stood waiting for the diligence. When it was almost in front of him, he called out:

“Stop! Any room inside?”

“Oh, yes, but not for tramps,” the postilion shouted as the diligence proceeded on its way. However, at the crest of the hill it stopped. When Schagerström came up, the postilion raised his cap.

“The driver says he recognized Ironmaster Schagerström by the voice.”

“Quite right.”

“Please step in and take a seat! There’s no one inside but two women.”

Any reasonable person must concede that it would be rather embarrassing for elderly persons who are jealous of their honour to confess to spying at wickets and searching stoves for discarded letters; so it was not surprising that the Dean's wife said nothing to Charlotte about her discovery.

On the other hand, neither she nor her husband could think of letting the young girl remain shut up in the pantry with her tiresome work. The Ekenstedt carriage was hardly outside the gate before the old lady poked her head in at the pantry door.

"I'll tell you what, my little duckling," she said, her old face shining with beneficence—"when I saw the Baroness drive off, I had a sudden inspiration. It would be nice, I thought, to take a journey while the weather was pleasant. I have an old sister at Örebro I haven't seen in ever so long. She would be glad if we paid her a visit."

Charlotte was a bit startled at first; but since seeing the Baroness and hearing her whispered assurances, the world had looked brighter to her. A journey to almost any place at all she would love above everything. That she had been taken back into favour by the Dean and his wife was by no means the least of her joys. All afternoon she was happy as a lark, and went about the house singing and chattering. Her scorned love and the hateful slander were quite forgotten. There were hurried preparations for the journey, and at ten in the evening they stood down by the garden gate, waiting for the Stockholm diligence.

When the big yellow coach, with its three span of horses, came into sight; when one heard the noisy rumble of wheels, the merry jingle of harness, the sharp crack of the whip, and the cheery blasts from the postilion's horn, it was enough to arouse the wanderlust in anyone. Charlotte went into transports of delight.

"Just to travel, to travel!" she burst forth ecstatically. "I'd like to travel day and night, around the world."

"Oh, you'd soon tire of it, my girl," said the Dean's wife. "But who knows? That wish may be fulfilled sooner than you think."

Reservations had been made from the inn, and the diligence stopped at the deanery to pick up the two passengers. The postilion, not daring to drop the reins, shouted from the box a pleasant "Good-evening" to the Fru and the Fröken, and asked them kindly to step in. "There's plenty of room," he said. "I haven't a single passenger inside."

"Oh, dear!" sighed the old lady. "And you think we should be pleased at that? You should have had a couple of handsome cavaliers in the coach for us to flirt with."

Everyone—the postilion, the driver, and the whole deanery household, which, with the exception of Karl Arthur, had come out to see them off—had a good laugh. When the Dean's wife had settled herself comfortably in a corner seat, with Charlotte at her side, the postilion tooted the signal, and they were off.

The two ladies kept up their chatter and banter awhile, but presently the older one fell asleep. Charlotte, being in a talkative mood, tried in vain to waken her.

"She has had a hard day," thought the young girl. "No wonder she's tired. It's a pity, though, for we could have had such a jolly time. As for me, I could talk all night."

To tell the truth, she was a little afraid of being alone with her own thoughts. Night had fallen, and the road ran through dense forests. Doubt and Despair lay in wait, ready

to fall upon her.

They had been driving about two hours when Charlotte heard a call to the diligence. When in a few moments the coach stopped and the new passenger stepped in, he took a seat just opposite Charlotte. For a while there was no sound in there except the quiet breathing of two sleepers. Charlotte had suddenly feigned sleep so that she would not have to speak to Schagerström. When she had got over her momentary astonishment, the imp of mischief flew into her. Such an opportunity she could not afford to let slip. Perhaps, in some artful way, she might be able to induce Schagerström to abandon his matrimonial plans. If, at the same time, she could chaff him a bit, it would do no harm.

Schagerström, who was still in the depths of despond, gave a start on hearing himself addressed by a voice from the opposite corner of the coach. He could not see the one who sat there; he could barely distinguish the light oval of a face.

"I beg pardon," said the voice, "but I think I heard the postilion speak the name Schagerström. Can this be Ironmaster Schagerström of whom I have heard so much?"

Schagerström felt slightly annoyed at being recognized, but could not deny facts. He raised his hat, and mumbled a few words apropos of nothing.

The voice out of the darkness was heard again.

"I wonder how it would feel to be so rich? I have never been in the company of a millionaire before. I don't know whether it is right of me to keep this seat and let the Ironmaster ride backward. I'll gladly exchange places."

The fellow passenger spoke in a meek and oily voice, and was afflicted, besides, with a slight lisp. If Schagerström had had any social intercourse with the people of Korskyrka town he would have thought at once it was Thea Sundler, the organist's wife, who was speaking. Of one thing, however, he was certain: He had never listened to a more affected and irritating voice.

"By all means keep your seat, madam!" he said.

"Oh, I am so used to hardship and discomfort," drawled the voice, "that it doesn't matter to me whether I occupy a despised place. But the Ironmaster, no doubt, is accustomed to sit in a gilded chair and to eat with a golden fork from a plate of gold."

"Let me tell you, milady," Schagerström retorted, his ire rising, "that for a good part of my life I have slept on straw and eaten with a wooden spoon from a pewter dish. I once had a master who, when angry at me, tore from my head such quantities of hair that by gathering up the remnants I saved enough for a cushion. It was the only soft pillow I had."

"How romantic!" gushed the slithery voice. "How lovely and how romantic!"

"Beg pardon, madam! it was not at all romantic; but it was useful, for it saved me from becoming such a fool as your ladyship takes me for."

"Oh, Ironmaster! what are you saying?—A fool!—Could a person in my position regard a millionaire as a fool? It is so interesting to learn what an exalted being thinks and feels. Dare I ask how you felt when your luck finally turned? Did you not feel—how shall I put it?—did you not feel as if you had come to the Seventh Heaven?"

“The Seventh Heaven!” Schagerström exclaimed in disgust. “Had I only been allowed to, I should have given away the entire fortune.”

He thought the person in the corner should have understood that he was annoyed and offended. But the oily voice ran on:

“How lovely that all this wealth has fallen into worthy hands! It is so gratifying to know that virtue has received its just reward.”

Schagerström made no response, hoping thus to escape further discussion of himself and his riches. The lady in the corner, though aware that she had been rather bold, did not subside; she simply took a new tack.

“And to think that the Ironmaster is going to marry that stuck-up Charlotte Löwensköld!”

“That what?” cried Schagerström indignantly.

“Ah, forgive me!” The voice became even more meek and insinuating. “I am one of the lowly of this earth, and unaccustomed to associate with grand people. I express myself poorly, and can’t help that the word ‘stuck-up’ always comes to the tip of my tongue when I speak of Charlotte. But if it is displeasing to the Ironmaster, I’ll not use it again.”

Schagerström emitted a grunt, which the person in the corner could take as his response if she wished.

“I understand, of course, that you made your choice after mature deliberation,” pursued the voice. “It is said that all your doings are carefully planned and deliberated. I presume that this would also apply to affairs of the heart. In any case, I should very much like to hear whether you really know what sort of person this stuck-up—beg pardon!—this pretty and charming Charlotte Löwensköld is. It is said that you had never exchanged a word with her until you proposed; but, of course, you satisfied yourself by other means that she was fitted to be mistress of Stora Sjötorp.”

“Milady seems to be well informed,” said Schagerström. “Is your ladyship one of Fröken Löwensköld’s intimate friends?”

“I have the honour, Ironmaster, to be the confidante of Karl Arthur Ekenstedt.”

“Ah!” said Schagerström.

“To come back to Charlotte—pardon my saying so, but you do not seem to be happy. I hear you sigh and groan. Can it be that you regret having promised to marry this—what shall I say?—this—ah—elusive young girl. That epithet, I hope, is not offensive to you! Elusive might mean—well, anything. I know that a Schagerström cannot take back his given word. The Dean and his wife are fair-minded persons, and ought to consider what they themselves have had to stand from Charlotte.”

“The Dean and his wife are very much attached to their ward.”

“Say, rather, that they are wonderfully patient. Yes, patient is the word for it. The Dean’s wife at one time had an excellent housekeeper. Charlotte didn’t like her, so she tweaked her nose one day, during the worst of the Christmas rush. Naturally, the poor thing was offended and left at once, and old Tante Gina, sick as she was, had to attend to all the work herself.”

Schagerström had shortly before heard a different version of the story, but he did not bother to put in a protest.

“Fancy, Ironmaster, the Dean who so loves his horses——”

“I know about her exercising them,” said Schagerström.

“But don’t you think it was dreadful of her?”

“I have heard that the horses were ready to expire in their stalls for lack of motion.”

“Perhaps the Ironmaster has also heard how she treated her former fiancé’s mother?”

“When she emptied the sugar basin?”

“Yes; when she poured all its contents on to her plate. A person to be mistress at Stora Sjötorp certainly ought to have good table manners.”

“Quite right, milady.”

“Surely, you wouldn’t care to have a wife who refused to receive your guests?”

“Why, no.”

“But that is what may happen, Ironmaster, if you marry Charlotte. Only think how she behaved at Chamberlain Dunker’s home! It had been arranged that she was to sit next to Captain Hammarberg at a grand banquet, but she positively declined, and said she would rather leave the house. As you may have heard, Ironmaster, Captain Hammarberg hasn’t the best reputation in the world; nevertheless, he has many good qualities, and I who am now speaking to you have had intimate talks with the Captain, and know how unhappy he is in mind and heart because nobody understands or trusts him. However, Charlotte is not his judge. If the Chamberlain receives him in his home why should she express her disapproval?”

“As to that,” said Schagerström, “I do not intend to invite Captain Hammarberg to my home.”

“Oh—ah—h’m!” murmured the voice. “That is another matter. I note that the Ironmaster has greater sympathy for Charlotte than I had supposed. It is very kind and chivalrous. I believe you would spring to the defence of anyone subjected to slander. But, in your heart, I think you will agree with me that a union between a gentleman of your standing and an erratic person like Charlotte would be utterly preposterous.”

“Milady means that, with the aid of the Dean and his wife, I—— No, no, impossible!”

“The impossible thing,” said the oily voice in its smoothest accents, “is to marry a person who is in such disgrace.”

“Disgrace?”

“Asking your pardon, Ironmaster, but you do not understand. You are too good-hearted. Karl Arthur Ekenstedt has told me how you stood up for Charlotte. Though you have now learned from sad experience that the accusations against her are true, still you defend her. But others are not like you, Ironmaster. Baroness Ekenstedt came to the deanery yesterday and left to-day. She would not see Charlotte, would not even sleep under the same roof with her.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” said the voice, “it’s the plain truth. And do you know, Ironmaster, that some of the men in the church town were so incensed over Charlotte’s behaviour that they decided to give her a whistle serenade, the way the students at Upsala do when they are displeased with a professor.”

“Oh!” gasped Schagerström, horrified.

“Last evening the young men appeared at the deanery and started the din. Karl Arthur, however, dissuaded them from continuing. His mother was staying for the night in the wing, and she wouldn’t tolerate anything of that sort.”

“Otherwise, young Ekenstedt, no doubt, would have let it go on.”

“I wouldn’t like to venture an opinion as to that. But, in the interest of justice, I hope the men will come again another night, and I also hope that blind Kalle will long go about singing his comic song of her. The words are by Captain Hammarberg, and they’re sung to the tune of *When the Moon Wanders*. When you have heard that ditty, Ironmaster Schagerström, you’ll understand why it would never do for you to marry Charlotte Löwensköld.”

Schagerström pounded on the wall of the coach as a signal to the driver to stop.

“Oh, I say, Ironmaster, are you getting out?”

“Yes, milady!” Schagerström was as furious now as he had been when, earlier in the evening, Britta Nyman had spoken in praise of Charlotte. “I see no other way to escape hearing further aspersions against a lady I hold in high regard and intend to marry.”

“But, for goodness’ sake, that was not the intention!”

Just then the diligence stopped. Schagerström flung the door open and sprang out.

“Oh, no, that was not the intention!” he shouted back, and quickly slammed the door after him. Then he stepped up to the postilion to pay his fare.

“Are you leaving us already, Ironmaster?” said the postilion. “Now the ladies will be unhappy. The Dean’s wife berated me when she got in because there were no gentlemen in the coach.”

“The Dean’s wife?—What dean’s wife?”

“The wife of the Dean of Korskyrka, of course. Haven’t you talked enough with the fellow passengers to find out that it was Fru Forsius and Fröken Löwensköld who were seated in the coach?”

The postilion raised his cap and plied the whip; the diligence went on its way, and, for a good while, Schagerström stood gazing after it.

“Charlotte Löwensköld!” he gasped. “Was that Charlotte Löwensköld?”

It was long after midnight when he returned to Gammalhyttan.

Foundry Manager Nyman and his wife meanwhile had been anxiously awaiting his return, and wondering if they ought not to send out men to search for him. They were pacing up and down the avenue when Schagerström at last came in sight. They saw his

powerful and rather settled figure outlined against the nocturnal sky. Though knowing it for Schagerström they could scarcely believe it was he.

The man who approached was singing an old ballad. As he met his hosts, he burst out laughing.

“For goodness’ sake, go to bed!” said he. “In the morning, you shall hear the whole story. By the by, Nyman, you’ll have to get ready to make that tour of inspection in my place. I must go down to Korskyrka again, to-morrow.”

CHAPTER XVI

THE BANNS

ON SATURDAY morning, Schagerström appeared at the deanery. He had come to consult with the Dean as to what had best be done to stop the persecution of Charlotte that had been recently started.

As a matter of fact, he could not have arrived at a more fitting moment. The poor old clergyman was beside himself with fear and indignation; the five small wrinkles in his forehead flamed red as fire.

The same morning he had been visited by three men from the church town: the apothecary, the organist, and the high bailiff. They had come to express their desire, and that of the entire community, that he turn Charlotte out of his house. The apothecary and the high bailiff had been quite civil; they had shown plainly that to them it was most unpleasant business to come on an errand of this sort. The organist, on the other hand, had been highly incensed; had raised his voice, been overbearing and utterly unmindful of the respect he owed his superior.

He had given the old Dean to understand that he was lowering his prestige by allowing Charlotte to remain at the deanery. It was not only that she had shamefully deceived her fiancé, or that she had conducted herself on various occasions in an unseemly manner; she had also laid violent hands on his wife, who certainly did not expect to meet with any harm when coming to this honoured house as a guest.

The Dean had declared outright that his kinswoman Fröken Löwensköld would remain in his house as long as he was able to hold his old head up. And with that as their answer the men had been obliged to depart. But one can imagine how unpleasant all this must have been to a peace-loving old gentleman!

“There’ll be no end to the clamour,” he said to Schagerström. “It has been going on like this the whole week. You may be certain, Ironmaster, that the organist won’t give up at the first attempt. The man himself is a very nice fellow, but his wife is goading him on.”

Schagerström, who was in excellent humour that day, tried to calm him; but with slight success.

“Ironmaster, I assure you,” the Dean continued, “that Charlotte is as innocent in this matter as a newborn child, and I couldn’t think of sending her away. But the peace of the parish, the peace which for thirty-five years I have fostered and guarded, will now be broken.”

Schagerström understood that that which the old Dean regarded as the most creditable achievement of his long pastorship was now in jeopardy. He doubted that the old man had the strength or the courage to resist further pressure from his parishioners.

“To tell the truth,” he said, “I, too, have heard about the persecution of Fröken Löwensköld. My errand here to-day is to consult with your Reverence on ways and means to combat it.”

“You are a clever man, Ironmaster, but I doubt that even you would be able to bridle the evil tongues. I suppose we’ll have to keep silence, and prepare for the worst.”

Schagerström began to protest, but the old man went on in the same doleful strain:

“We must be prepared for the worst. If only you were safely married! Or, if at least the banns had been published!”

Schagerström jumped to his feet. “Would it be any help, do you think, if we ordered the banns read?”

“Assuredly, it would be a help,” said the old man, brightening. “If the people of the parish knew for certain that Charlotte was to be your wife, they would leave her in peace. In that case, she would be allowed to remain at the deanery till the day of the wedding, and no one would say a word. People are so constituted, Ironmaster, that they do not care to offend the rich and powerful.”

“Then I would suggest that the banns be proclaimed from the pulpit to-morrow,” said Schagerström.

“This is a very kind thought on your part, Ironmaster, but it can’t be done. Charlotte is away from home at present, and you probably have not the necessary papers with you.”

“The papers are at Stora Sjötorp,” said Schagerström, “and can be fetched. As your Reverence knows, I have Fröken Löwensköld’s definite promise and, besides, you are her guardian.”

“No, no, Ironmaster—not quite so hurriedly!”

The old man began to talk of something else. He showed Schagerström a number of rare botanical specimens, and told him where he had found them. While discoursing on his pet subject, he grew animated and eloquent. It seemed as if he had quite forgotten his troubles. However, in a short while he came back to the subject under discussion.

“The reading of the banns is no nuptial ceremony,” he said. “If Charlotte is dissatisfied, they can be revoked.”

“This is merely a question of expediency,” Schagerström elucidated, “in order to preserve peace and harmony in the community, and to put a stop to the slander and persecution. I have no intention of dragging Fröken Löwensköld to the altar against her will.”

“Aye, who knows?” The Dean was thinking of a certain letter he had read. “Charlotte is very impulsive, let me tell you; for her sake, it would be best to put a stop to the gossip at once. Else, perhaps, she wouldn’t rest content with merely cutting off a few curls.”

They went on discussing the matter of the banns for some little time, and became more and more convinced that it was the best way out of the difficulty.

“I’m sure that my wife would be with us in this,” said the Dean, who now had become quite hopeful.

Schagerström was thinking to himself that the moment the banns of marriage for him and Charlotte had been published, he would have the right to appear as her protector. Then there would be no more whistle serenades or any lampooning.

For the rest, one must consider that Schagerström, since the conversation in the diligence, had become satisfied that Charlotte was disinterested, and had only the most tender feeling for her. There was something positively alluring about the step he wished to take; but this, naturally, he would not admit, even to himself. He was persuaded that he was acting purely from necessity. That is the way of people when they are in love, and one must overlook their stupidities.

It was finally decided that the banns should be published at church on the morrow. Schagerström hurried home to fetch the required papers, and the Dean himself wrote the license for the banns of marriage. When everything was in order, Schagerström felt greatly relieved. Indeed, he had no objection to his name being read out in church in connection with Charlotte's!

"Foundry Owner Gustaf Henrik Schagerström and the Honourable Charlotte Löwensköld" would sound well, he thought. He felt a keen desire to hear it himself, and decided to stop over at Korskyrka till after the Sunday service.

* * *

On the Sunday of the first reading of the banns, Karl Arthur Ekenstedt preached an extraordinary sermon; which was only to be expected after the harrowing experiences he had been through during the week.

The Scriptural lesson for the day was on the false prophets against which our Saviour warned His disciples. The subject, however, did not accord with the mood of the preacher; he would have preferred to discourse on the vanity of earthly things, the menace of riches, and the blessings of poverty. Above all, he felt the need to approach his hearers in a simpler and more intimate way than had been his wont; to make them understand how much he loved them, and thereby win their confidence.

Tormented by doubt and uncertainty, he had been unable, during the week, to prepare his sermon. All Saturday night he had sat up working, but to no avail, the sermon was still unfinished when it came time for him to leave for church. So as not to be utterly stranded, he tore from an old postil a few pages containing a sermon on the lesson for that day, and thrust them into his pocket.

While from the pulpit he stood reading the Gospel, a thought shaped itself in his mind. He seized upon it as though it had come straight from God.

"My dear friends," he began, "I stand here to-day to warn you in the Name of Christ against false prophets. But perhaps in your hearts you are thinking: He who now speaks to us, is he a proper teacher? What do we know of him? What assurance have we that he, too, is not a thorn on which no grapes can grow, or a thistle, from which one cannot gather figs? Therefore, my friends, I should like to tell you something of the ways by which God led me when He willed to make me a proclaimer of His Word."

With deep feeling the young pastor then related the simple story of his life. He told his hearers how in his first years at college it had been his sole ambition to be a great and noted scientist. He told of how he had failed in his Latin; of his homecoming, when he had offended against his mother; of the reconciliation, and, finally, how it had all led to his making acquaintance with the Pietist Pontus Friman.

He spoke quietly and with rare modesty. None could doubt the sincerity of his every utterance. But perhaps it was mostly the vibrant note in his voice that charmed his hearers. After the first few sentences they listened in rapt stillness, with heads thrust forward and eyes riveted upon the preacher.

As always happens when a person speaks out freely and honestly, as man to man, they were drawn to him, and took him to their hearts. The poor from the forest cabins and the rich from the great mining estates, all understood that he was giving them his confidence in order to win theirs and restore their faith in him. They followed his sermon as never before; they were moved and rejoiced.

He went on to tell of his first faltering attempts to follow Jesus. He described the marriage feast in his home, when carried away by the joys of earth, he had become as it were intoxicated with its pleasures, and joined in the dance.

“After that night,” he said, “for many weeks darkness reigned in my soul. I knew that I had betrayed my Master; that I had failed to watch and pray with Him. I was a slave of the world, conquered by its temptations. I felt that Heaven would never be my heritage.”

As he pictured for the people his anguish of mind there were many in the church who wept. The man in the pulpit had them wholly in his power; they felt, and suffered, and strove with him.

He said further: “My friend Friman sought to comfort and help me. He assured me that in the love of Christ lay salvation. But I could not lift up my heart to our Saviour, for I loved the things created above their Creator.

“Then, one night, when my need was greatest I saw the Christ. I was not asleep; during those days and nights there was no sleep for me. But frequently visions, such as one sees in dreams, would pass before my eyes. I knew that they were called forth by my extreme physical weariness, and attached no significance to them.

“Suddenly came a vision that stood out, clear and distinct. It did not vanish at once like the others. I saw a lake of blue and shining waters, along the shore of which there was a great gathering of people. In the midst of this gathering sat a man with flowing locks and deep, sorrowful eyes, who seemed to be speaking to the multitude. The instant I beheld him, I knew that it was Jesus.

“And I saw a young man step up to Jesus, bow low before Him, and ask Him a question. I could not hear his words, but I knew that he was the rich young man of whom it is related in the Gospel of Saint Luke that he asked the Master what he must do to inherit eternal life.

“Jesus then spoke a few words to the youth, and I knew that He said to him that he should keep the Ten Commandments of God.

“The young man again bowed low before the Master, and smiled a self-satisfied smile. I knew that he answered, ‘All these have I kept from my youth up.’

“Jesus looked at him long and searchingly, then He spoke again. And this time also I knew what He said. ‘Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’

“The young man now turned from Jesus and went his own way. And I saw that he was sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And for a long while Jesus sat looking after him. And in His look I read such infinite love and such infinite compassion! Oh, my friends, in that look there was something so heavenly it made my heart leap for joy, and light came again to my darkened soul! I sprang up. I wanted to rush over to Him and cry out that I loved Him above everything. The world was nothing to me now; my only desire was to be allowed to follow Him.

“But as I moved the vision passed, though not from memory, my friends, not from memory!

“The next day I went to my friend Pontus Friman, and asked him what he thought Christ required of me, for I had no possessions to offer Him. He said that Jesus surely wished me to sacrifice for His sake all glory and distinction that might come to me through my learning, and become His poor and lowly servant. And so I cast aside all thought of this other, and became an humble parson, that I might speak to the people of Christ and His love.

“But pray for me, my friends, for I, like you, must live in this world. The world would tempt me, and I am in fear and trembling lest it turn my desire away from Christ, and make of me one of the false prophets.”

The preacher folded his hands. All at once he seemed to see the temptations and the anguish of soul that lay before him, and at the thought of his own frailty he burst into tears. Overcome by his emotions, and unable to continue, he pronounced a short “Amen,” then sank to his knees in prayer.

Everywhere in the church people broke into audible sobs. By that one brief address, Karl Arthur had made himself the idol of all these people. They could have borne him in their arms; they could have sacrificed themselves for him as he had sacrificed himself for his Lord and Maker.

Whatever the effect produced by his sermon, it would not have been so consummate but for the reading of the banns, which immediately followed.

The young clergyman first read out a few indifferent names, to which no one gave any further thought. Suddenly he blanched perceptibly and bent down over the paper, to see whether his eyes had deceived him. Whereupon he read the banns in a low voice, as if not wishing them to be heard.

“I publish the banns of marriage between Foundry Owner Gustaf Henrik Schagerström of Stora Sjötorp and the Honourable Charlotte Adriana Löwensköld of the Rectory, both of this parish. This is the first time of reading.

“Wishing them happiness in this holy union and the blessing of God, Who instituted the Sacrament of Marriage.”

It did not help that the young clergyman had lowered his voice almost to a whisper; in the funereal stillness of the church his every syllable carried.

It was dreadful!

Schagerström himself realized how dreadful it was. There stood the man who would renounce the world to become an humble follower of Christ, reading that the woman he had loved was to marry one of the richest men in the country.

Aye, it was positively shocking. There in the pulpit stood the man who for five years had been Charlotte's affianced, and who only the Sunday before had worn on his finger her engagement ring! And now she was ready to wed another. The people blushed for shame. They dared not look at one another as they passed out after the service.

Schagerström felt it worse than anyone, though he maintained an appearance of calmness; but in his heart he thought: "I would not wonder at the people if they spat upon me or cast stones."

And this was what he had imagined would rehabilitate Charlotte! Many a time he had felt awkward and foolish, but never to such a degree as when on that Sunday he walked up the main aisle out of the church.

* * *

Schagerström at first thought of writing Charlotte a letter of explanation and apology; but he quickly found that to indite such a letter was too difficult a thing, and decided instead to order a conveyance and drive down to Örebro.

He had learned from Dean Forsius the name of the elderly Fru the ladies were visiting, and on Monday morning he called on Charlotte and asked if he might have a talk with her.

He immediately told her of his presumptuous act; he did not seek to justify himself, but simply stated how it had all come about.

Charlotte crumpled as if she had received a mortal wound. To keep from falling, she sank into a low armchair, where she remained motionless. She did not break forth in reproaches; her agony was too great, too real.

Until then she had been able to say to herself that when Karl Arthur, with the help of his mother, had come to think differently; when he had renewed the old bond with her, her honour would be restored and her traducers would understand that the whole thing had been only a lovers' quarrel. But now that the banns for her and Schagerström had been read in church, everyone must think that she actually intended to marry the rich Ironmaster.

There was no help for it now. Nor was it possible for her to explain. She was forever disgraced. People would always think her false-hearted and mercenary.

She had the horrible sensation of being driven as a manacled captive toward some unknown goal. All that she wished to avoid she seemed to do; all that she tried to avert she only furthered.

It was like sorcery. Everything went wrong. From the day Schagerström first proposed to her, she had not been a free agent.

"Ironmaster, who are you?" she asked abruptly. "Why do you continually cross my path? Why can't I tear myself free from you?"

"Who am I?—Well," said Schagerström, "I'll tell you, Fröken Löwensköld: I am the stupidest ass on God's green earth."

And he said it with such honest conviction it brought a faint smile to Charlotte's face.

"From the time I first saw you at church, Fröken, I have wanted to be of service to you and to see you happy; but I have brought you only sorrow and suffering."

The ghost of a smile had already vanished. Charlotte now sat inert, her face deathly white, her arms hanging limp at her sides. The staring eyes seemed to see nothing but the dire misfortune he had brought upon her.

"Fröken Löwensköld," said Schagerström, "I give you my personal permission to forbid the banns next Sunday. You know, Fröken, that the banns are not valid in law until they have been read on three consecutive Sundays from the same pulpit."

Charlotte by a slight movement of her hand told him that this concession meant nothing now; her reputation was ruined and could not be saved.

"And I promise you, Fröken Löwensköld, not to cross your path again till you, yourself, call me."

Schagerström moved toward the door. There was one thing more he wished to say to her. It called for greater self-abnegation than anything that had preceded it.

"I should like to add," he said, "that I'm beginning to understand you, Fröken Löwensköld. I have wondered a little how you could love young Ekenstedt so greatly as to expose yourself, on his account, to all this calumny and persecution; for I comprehend, of course, that you think only of him. But now that I have heard him preach, I see why he must be shielded. He is destined for something big."

He felt rewarded, as she now looked up at him and he saw a little colour come into her cheek.

"Thank you, Ironmaster!" she said. "I thank you for understanding." And then she sank again into a lethargy of hopelessness. There was nothing more for him to do, so he bowed and went his way.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PAUPER AUCTION

IT IS said that misfortunes always bring a little good in their wake. And to Charlotte Löwensköld grief and humiliation had brought the very thing she had lacked to be truly charming.

The deep despond had driven away all that had been too boylike in her nature, and too audacious. It had given to her voice, her features, her bearing, a gentle dignity, and to the eyes, that shimmer of wistfulness, the appealing, fitful glow that bespeaks a lost happiness. This lovely, chastened young girl would awaken interest, sympathy, and affection wherever she appeared.

Charlotte and the Dean's wife had returned from Örebro in the forenoon of Tuesday, and in the afternoon a party of young people from the near-by foundry estate of Holma called at the deanery. Among these dear young persons Charlotte had friends who, like the Fru at Gammalhyttan, refused to believe any evil of her. And now they had only to see her to know that she had met with a great sorrow. They asked no questions and made no allusions to her prospective marriage; they simply tried to be as kind and considerate as they could.

As a matter of fact, they had not come to offer their congratulations on the banns, but on quite a different errand. Seeing how depressed Charlotte was, they scarcely knew whether to present the matter.

However, after a little, it crept out that they wished to speak of Crofter Matts's Elin, the girl with the purple birthmark and the ten brothers and sisters. Elin had been to Holma that morning and complained to their mother that her little brothers and sisters were to be auctioned off.

Crofter Matts's Elin and her brothers and sisters had lived by beggary. What else could the poor things have done? But people had grown tired of feeding this large brood of hungry mouths, and the parish authorities had decided to put the children out to board in various homes. An auction of sorts had been announced, where those wishing to take over one or more of the children could make their bids.

"Your ladyship probably knows how it's done," the girl had said. "The only thing the authorities want to know is, who will take the youngsters at the least possible cost to the parish. No one thinks of the children, whether they will have proper care and upbringing."

The poor girl, who had been as a mother to the younger children, was frantic with dread. She knew that people who bid in children at these auctions were poor crofters needing cheap labour: herders for their sheep and goats, and domestic help for toil-worn housewives. Her little brothers and sisters would have to work hard as regular servants, for nobody spared these auction youngsters; they had to earn such fare as was provided them. The youngest child, a little girl, was only three years of age, so that she, of course, could not go as herder or houseworker. Her they would surely starve to death, since she was too small to make herself useful.

Most of all, Elin had deplored that the children would be separated and scattered in different directions. There was now a very strong bond of unity and affection between them, but in a few years' time, they would be strangers to one another and to her. And hereafter, who would teach them to be upright and truth loving, which she had always tried to do?

The kindly lady of Holma had been deeply moved by the poor girl's plaint; but there were so many youngsters on the hillsides around Holma she had to do for, that she felt unable to take upon herself any additional responsibilities. However, she sent two of her daughters to the pauper auction, which was to be held later in the forenoon at the parish public room, as she wished to know who bid in the poor little things.

When the young ladies from Holma stepped into the public room, the auction had just begun. On a long bench, far forward, sat the pauper children—the eldest in the middle, with the three-year-old in her lap, the others ranged on either side of her. They made no outcry; only a low and continuous wailing was heard. Ragged and starved as the children looked, one would have thought they could not be worse off than they were already; yet, obviously, that which was in store seemed to them the acme of misery.

Over against the wall on all sides of the room sat the bidders—poor folk, as was to be expected at an auction of this kind. Only at the counsel table there were a few members of the Parish Council—some two or three rich farmers and a couple of mine-owners who were there to see that the auction was conducted in an orderly manner, and that the children were given over to reputable folk, well known in the parish.

The eldest boy, a thin, gaunt lad, was standing on the table, placed there for public inspection. The man who offered him was holding forth on his potentialities as herdboy and woodcutter, and a woman who, judging from her attire, must have been extremely poor, came forward to have a better look at the boy and see whether he was any good for work.

That was as far as they had got with the auction, when the door opened and Karl Arthur Ekenstedt came in. He paused a moment on the threshold, and looked round the room; then, raising his arms toward heaven, he cried out: "O God, turn Thine eyes away from us! Look not on what is happening here!" Whereupon he went up to the counsel table, and said to the authorities:

"My fellow Christians, I beg of you not to commit so great a sin! Let us not sell human beings into slavery!"

All present were aghast at the Curate's action. The shabby woman at the table quickly drew back and made for the door. The peasant councilmen, in their embarrassment, shifted uneasily on the bench. Obviously, it was the Curate's interference in the business of the parish they disapproved, rather than their own doings. At last one man rose.

"This auction is held in accordance with a resolution passed at a vestry meeting," he said.

The young clergyman stood there, handsome as a god, his head thrown back, his eyes blazing. He certainly did not look as if he meant to give way to any such vestry

resolution.

“Mine-owner Aaron Månsson,” he said, addressing the Chairman, “I request that the auction be suspended.”

“Dr. Ekenstedt has heard that the auction is a decision of the vestry.”

Karl Arthur, with a shrug, turned away from the man and placed his hand on the shoulder of the lad who was up for sale.

“I’ll buy him,” he said. “My bid is so low that none can underbid me. I offer to take charge of the boy without any compensation from the parish.”

Mine-owner Aaron Månsson now rose again. Karl Arthur did not look at him, but said to the auctioneer:

“No need to cry out any more. I offer to take all the children on the same terms.”

Now everyone stood up, except Crofter Matts’s Elin and her brothers and sisters, who did not comprehend what had happened.

Mine-owner Aaron Månsson protested that it would be the same old nuisance over again; that the auction had been called in order to have done with this perpetual beggary.

“The children will do no more begging,” said Karl Arthur.

“Who will be sponsor for that?”

“Jesus Christ; He Who said, ‘Let the children come unto me,’ He will sponsor these little ones.”

There was a commanding power and a noble dignity about the young clergyman as he said that, and the rich mine-owner could not find words to answer him.

Karl Arthur now went over to the children. “Go your way,” he said to them. “Run back home! I have bidden you in.”

They were still afraid to move. Karl Arthur then lifted up the littlest one, and, with her in his arms and the ten others following close behind, he left the parish public room.

No one attempted to stop them. Some of the bidders, shamed and abashed, had already departed.

When the two sisters went home and recounted it all to their mother, the latter declared that something must be done to help the young curate with the care of his numerous wards; she suggested that they start at once to raise funds for a home for orphans, and it was in order to speak of this that the girls had come to the deanery.

When Charlotte had heard all, she arose and went out of the room, weeping. She had to hurry upstairs to her own room so that she might go down on her knees and give thanks to God.

Her long-cherished dream had now come true: Karl Arthur had stepped forth as a leader of the people; a foregoer who led the people in the ways of God.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE TRIUMPH

“HUSBAND dear,” said Fru Forsius, coming into the Dean’s study a day or two after the auction, “find an excuse to go to the dining room if you want to see something lovely!”

The old man rose at once. As he stepped into the dining room he saw Charlotte seated at a small table over by the window with some needlework in her hand. She was not working, but sat gazing out toward the wing where Karl Arthur had his quarters. There was a constant stream of callers that day, passing between the gate and the wing, and it was this she sat watching.

The Dean pretended to be hunting for his spectacles, which he knew were safe in his own room. Meanwhile he cast sidelong glances at Charlotte who, with a happy smile, followed intently all that was happening down by the wing. A faint flush coloured her cheek, and her eyes shone with a rapt serenity. She really was lovely to look at.

When Charlotte became aware of the Dean’s presence in the room, she said to him: “All day people pass in and out at Karl Arthur’s.”

“Yes,” replied the old man drily. “They don’t leave him in peace for a second. I’ll soon have to attend to my daybooks myself.”

“She who has just gone in is a daughter to Aaron Månsson; she has brought a firkin of butter.”

“That, of course, is a contribution for those children.”

“Everyone loves him!” cried Charlotte ecstatically. “I knew it was bound to come.”

“Oh, well, when one is young and good-looking,” the Dean remarked laconically, “it isn’t hard to fool the old women, and make them weep buckets of tears.”

But Charlotte’s ardour was not to be dampened.

“Awhile ago one of the smiths from Holma came seeking him—one of those Pietists who, as Uncle knows, never come to church and won’t listen to any of the regular clergymen.”

“What are you telling me?” The old Dean was really interested now. “Has he actually been able to move those blocks of stone? I verily believe, my girl, there’s something in the fellow!”

“Think how happy his mother would be if she could see this!” said Charlotte.

“I don’t know whether this was precisely the kind of success she wished for her son.”

“He makes people better. Some come away from him weeping and drying their eyes. Marie Louise’s husband has also been to see him. Think! If Karl Arthur could help *him*, wouldn’t it be wonderful!”

“It would indeed, my girl. But the best of it all is that you like to sit here and see the people.”

“I’m sitting here conjecturing what they talk to him about, and I seem to hear what he says to them.”

“Aye, aye, that’s right, my girl. Do you know—I think those spectacles must be somewhere in my study.”

“If this had not come to pass,” said Charlotte musingly, “the whole thing would have been unexplainable. Then I should have had no reward for trying to shield him. But now I understand the reason for it all.”

The old Dean hurried out of the room. In a second, the girl would have had him weeping. “What in the world shall we do with her?” he mumbled to himself. “Surely, she can’t be losing her mind!”

But if Charlotte gloried in Karl Arthur’s triumph during the week, she had even greater cause for rejoicing when it came Sunday. The roads swarmed with people, just as when Royalty visited the parish. Carriages and pedestrians moved in unbroken procession. Evidently reports of the young clergyman’s new kind of preaching, his piety and power, had spread throughout the parish.

“The church won’t hold them all,” observed the Dean’s wife. “Everyone has come out to a man. I only hope that fires won’t break out while their homes stand deserted!”

The old Dean was not altogether satisfied. He knew that a religious revival had begun, to which he would have had no objections had he only been certain that Karl Arthur was the right man to keep the sacred flame burning. But, rather than wound Charlotte, who was in ecstasies, he kept his doubts to himself.

Late in the week the girl had had a letter from the Baroness, begging her to be patient a few days more; consequently, she did not take advantage of Schagerström’s permission to forbid a second reading of the banns.

The Dean and his wife, fearing that all these people who now fairly worshipped Karl Arthur might offer some insult to Charlotte, thought it best to leave her at home.

Their carriage had no sooner disappeared round the corner of the garden than Charlotte put on her hat and mantilla and set off for church on foot. She wanted to hear Karl Arthur preach in the new, compelling way by which he had won the hearts of his hearers; wanted to have the pleasure of witnessing the adoration that now centred about him.

Charlotte managed to squeeze herself into a pew far back in the church, where she sat in breathless suspense until Karl Arthur appeared in the pulpit.

She marvelled at the easy, natural tone of voice in which he addressed the congregation. It was as if he were conversing with a group of friends. Not one word did he use that was not easily understood by the simplest person there, and he told the people of his trials and his struggles as if seeking help and guidance from them.

Karl Arthur that Sunday had to speak on the parable of the unjust steward whom Jesus commended, and Charlotte felt uneasy as she thought of his having to expound a text so difficult and paradoxical. She had heard many clerics complain that the parable

was obscure, and hard to interpret. The beginning and the end did not seem to belong together. It was, perhaps, because of the strictly condensed form in which the parable had been recorded that it was almost incomprehensible to people of our day. Charlotte had heard various preachers discourse on the first part and on the second, but never any who could give clarity and continuity to the parable as a whole.

Doubtless everyone in the church thought the same—that the text was too difficult for him; that he would stray from the subject as he had done on the previous Sunday.

With supreme courage and confidence the young curate took up the obscure Scriptural text and gave it meaning and significance. Led by a divine inspiration, he revealed the parable in all its pristine beauty and mystic depth. It was as when one washes away the dust of centuries from an old painting, and finds himself standing before a masterpiece.

Charlotte grew more and more astonished. “From where does he get all this? It is not himself speaking. It is God Who speaks through his mouth.”

She saw how the Dean sat with a hand cupped to his ear so as not to miss a word; she noted that the attention seemed to be most marked among the older men, among those who liked profound and serious thought. After this, none could say of Karl Arthur that he preached for women only, or that it was his fine appearance that carried him through.

Everything was perfect. Charlotte was happy. She wondered if life ever again would be as rich and glorious as it was in that hour.

But perhaps the most noteworthy thing about Karl Arthur’s preaching was the comfort and peace it gave to his hearers, making them forget their afflictions. They felt that they were being led by a good and wise shepherd. Many in that congregation made solemn promises in their hearts, which they afterward tried to live up to.

And yet, it was not the sermon, beautiful though it was, that made the greatest impression upon the people that Sunday. Nor was it the reading of the banns of marriage. The banns for Charlotte and Schagerström were followed, of course, by murmurs of disapproval; but, then, everyone knew beforehand that they were coming. No, it was something else.

Charlotte had tried to slip out immediately after the sermon; but, the church being crowded to the doors, she had to stay through the entire Altar Service.

When the people afterward began to move toward the exit, she again sought to hurry out ahead of the crowd. But in vain. No one stepped aside to let her pass; no one spoke to her.

She felt instantly that she was surrounded by enemies. Several of her old acquaintances drew away as she approached. Only one person came up to her—her brave sister, Fru Romelius. When the two were at last outside the door, they stopped short.

On the walk leading from the church stood a group of young men with bouquets of thistle, of yellowed leaves, of dried grass which had been hastily gathered outside the wall of the churchyard. Obviously it was their intention to present these to Charlotte as offerings of congratulation on the banns. In the forefront stood the tall Captain

Hammarberg, who was considered the cleverest wit and the wickedest man in the parish. He cleared his throat in preparation for the delivery of a befitting congratulatory speech.

The church people had gathered round the young men, and were waiting in gleeful expectation to hear the young girl who had jilted her lover for goods and gold held up to ridicule and scorn. They grinned in anticipation. Hammarberg was not likely to spare her, they thought to themselves.

Fru Romelius, trembling for her sister, tried to draw her back into the church, but the latter would not go.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Charlotte. “Nothing matters now.”

They were advancing slowly toward the waiting men, who had assumed a mien of smiling friendliness, when Karl Arthur came running toward them. Having noted their dilemma in passing, he quickly turned back to go to their aid. He offered an arm to the elder sister, raised his hat to the felicitating gentlemen, gave them to understand, by a gesture, that they must not carry out their design, and conducted the two ladies safely through the crowd down to the highway.

That he, the supposedly injured party, had taken under his protection the one who had wronged him, that was something beautiful; something not to be seen every day! And it was this that made the greatest impression upon the people that Sunday.

CHAPTER XIX

ADMONISHING CUPID

CHARLOTTE went down to the village next morning to consult her sister, Fru Romelius. The sister, like most of the Löwenskölds, was deeply interested in the supernatural. She would tell of having seen the dead wander on the village street in the full light of day, and there was no ghost story too wild for her to believe. Charlotte, who was of a different cast of mind and who had always laughed at the sister's visions, now wanted to hear her interpretation of the mystery which she, herself, had been unable to solve.

The young girl, after the unpleasant scene at the church, again had become sensible of her unhappy plight. Again she felt as when Schagerström had told her about the bans—that she was bound and held in thrall by strange powers. She had the feeling that she was being pursued by some malevolent being, who had parted her from Karl Arthur, and who was continually sending fresh misfortunes upon her.

Oppressed by an indescribable physical weariness, the girl walked slowly toward the church town, keeping her eyes the while to the ground. Persons who saw her probably thought she was suffering from a bad conscience, and dared not meet their gaze. It was only with great effort that she finally reached the village street.

She was just dragging herself along the high hedge enclosing the organist's garden, when the gate opened and someone came out into the road and started to walk in her direction. She involuntarily looked up. It was Karl Arthur! . . . She was so startled at seeing him here, and nobody else about, that she stopped dead. He had not gone many paces, however, when a voice from the garden called him back.

The weather was more fitful now than it had been earlier in the summer. Sudden, violent showers came pelting down at all hours of the day. Fru Sundler, having seen a dark cloud appear behind the forest ridge, came running down the garden path with her husband's long caped coat over her arm to offer to Karl Arthur.

As Charlotte slipped past the gate, she saw her help him on with the coat. The two were standing only a step or so away from the gate and she could not help seeing them. Fru Sundler was buttoning the coat for Karl Arthur, who laughed in his boyish way at her being so careful of him.

The woman looked happy and at ease. It was all very innocent apparently, but when Charlotte saw how she took thought for Karl Arthur like a mother or a wife, it struck her instantly that the woman was in love with him. The girl hastened on lest she might see more; but she said to herself, again and again, "She loves him. I should have understood it before. This explains everything; this is why she has parted us."

She knew at once that Karl Arthur had no suspicion of it; he was probably dreaming the whole time of his pretty Dalar girl. To be sure, he passed all his evenings now at the organist's house. But no doubt it was the good singing and playing that drew him there. Besides, he had to have someone to talk to, and Thea was an old friend of his family.

The girl was neither shocked nor distressed at her discovery. She raised her head, straightened her back, and walked now with her usual erectness and elasticity.

“It is Thea Sundler who has caused all the mischief,” thought Charlotte, “but I’ll surely be able to cope with her.”

She felt like a sick person who has learned the nature of the illness from which he is suffering, and knows it to be curable. Her hope had been renewed, her confidence restored.

“Fancy my thinking it was the dead General’s ugly old signet ring that was out witching again!” she laughed.

She had a vague recollection of once having heard her father say that a promise the Löwenskölds were supposed to have made to Thea Sundler’s mother, Malvina Spaak, had not been kept, and that therefore a terrible punishment would be meted out to them. It was in order to find out the particulars that she was on her way to her sister’s. She had thought until now that the things which had happened to her these last few weeks were linked with some inexorable fate from which there was no escape. But since it was nothing more serious than that Thea Sundler was in love with Karl Arthur, she could find a remedy.

She suddenly abandoned the idea of calling on her sister, and went back home. No, she did not want to believe herself the victim of some ancient curse; she would trust to her own common sense, her strength of will, her initiative, and banish from her thoughts such childish superstitions.

That night, as Charlotte undressed for bed, she stood a long time before a little porcelain Cupid that rested on her bureau.

“So it is *her* you have been protecting all the while,” she said to the little image. “Your hand has been held over her and not over me. Then it was for her sake, because she loved Karl Arthur, that Schagerström had to propose to me, and that all these other things had to happen. So it was for her sake that Karl Arthur and I had to quarrel; for her sake that he had to propose to the Dalar girl; for her sake that Schagerström had to send me those flowers, which spoiled the chance of a reconciliation.

“O Cupid! why do you protect her love? Is it because it is secret? Is it true that you look with the greatest favour upon the kind of love that isn’t sanctioned?”

“My dear Cupid, you should blush for shame! I have placed you here to watch over my love, and you—you only help the other one.

“Because Thea Sundler loves Karl Arthur, you have allowed me to suffer slander, lampooning, and whistle serenading without coming to my defence. Because Thea Sundler loves Karl Arthur you let me say Yes to Schagerström; you let the bans be proclaimed for us, and perhaps you also mean to lead us to the altar.

“Because Thea Sundler loves Karl Arthur, you have allowed us all to live in a state of misery and terror. You spare no one. The old couple here at the deanery, and his old parents at Karlstad, all must suffer because you protect that fat, fish-eyed wife of the organist!

“Because Thea Sundler loves Karl Arthur you have robbed me of my happiness. I thought it was some horrid troll that wanted to destroy me, and it was none other than

you, Cupid, none other than you!”

She had begun in a bantering tone, but the recital of her many cruel experiences worked upon her feelings so that her voice shook as she continued:

“O thou god of lovers, have I not shown thee that I can love?

“Is her love more pleasing to thee than mine? Is she, then, more steadfast than I? Does her heart burn with a stronger, purer flame than mine? Wherefore, wingèd god of lovers, dost thou watch over her love and not over mine?

“What can I do to propitiate thee? O Cupid, Cupid, bethink! Thou art driving him I love to despair and ruin! Dost thou also mean to give her his love? That is the only thing thou hast so far denied her. Cupid! Cupid! dost thou mean to give her his love?”

Then she questioned no more, wondered no more, but went to bed weeping.

CHAPTER XX

THE FUNERAL FEAST

A FEW days after the Baroness Ekenstedt's return from her visit to Korskyrka Deanery there came to the city of Karlstad a very pretty Dalar girl, one of those itinerant peddlers who carry their wares in a big leather bag, slung across the shoulders. In the city, where there were regular merchants, she was not allowed to carry on her usual trade. Leaving the heavy bag at her lodgings, she fared forth with a small basket on her arm containing hair bracelets and watch chains made of hair—her own handiwork.

The young Dalar girl, in her house-to-house quest of purchasers for these trinkets, came also to the Ekenstedt home. The Baroness, charmed with the beautiful workmanship, invited the vendor to stop at the house a few days and make up some souvenirs from the long fair curls she had cut from her son's head in his childhood, and carefully treasured. The offer was most acceptable to the young wayfarer; and she set about the work the following morning.

Mamselle Jaquette Ekenstedt, who was rather clever with her hands, would often run over to the Dalar girl's room, at the back of the house, to see her at her work. In this way, the two became acquainted and formed what might almost be termed a friendship. The rich city girl was attracted to the poor country lass by the latter's good looks, which were enhanced considerably by her picturesque costume. Jaquette admired the girl's deftness and skill and her good head, which manifested itself in her ability to give terse and pertinent answers.

She was surprised to find such keen intelligence in a person who could neither read nor write, and was somewhat taken aback when, on one or two occasions, she surprised her puffing at a small iron pipe; but, on the whole, there was nothing to mar their pleasant relations.

An amusing thing, too, was the Dalar girl's use of quaint words and expressions which Mamselle Ekenstedt did not understand. Once, when Jaquette was taking her new friend through the house to show her the many fine objects of art they had in the home, the poor girl could only express her wonder and delight by saying "That was gross." Mamselle Jaquette felt rather offended until she found, to her great amusement, that the word *gross* on the lips of a Dalar woman denoted something especially beautiful and grand.

The Baroness herself rarely looked in on the busy worker in hair. It seemed as if she had chosen to make her daughter the medium through whom she would investigate the character, the habits, and the capabilities of the girl, and so find out whether she could be thought of as a wife for her son. For that she had surmised from the first that the young woman was her son's new fiancée none could doubt who had any idea of the Baroness's keenness of perception.

However, the Dalar girl's stay at the Ekenstedt house was cut short by a sad event. The Colonel's sister, Fru Elise Sjöberg, widow of the late Provost, who, since the death

of her husband, had made her home with her brother, had suffered an apoplectic seizure, after which she lived but a few hours. There were the funeral preparations, and the whole house was given over to seamstresses, bakewomen, and decorators, who were to drape the rooms in black; and the Dalar girl, of course, was immediately dismissed.

She was called to the Colonel's office to receive her pay. The servants noted that the conference lasted uncommonly long, and that when she came out her eyes were red from weeping. The kind-hearted housekeeper, thinking the girl was unhappy at having to leave this house where she had been so well treated, as a kind of solace invited her to come to the kitchen on the day of the funeral for a taste of the delicacies they would be having then.

The day set for the burial was Thursday, August 13. The son of the house, Dr. Karl Arthur Ekenstedt, who had been called home, arrived on Wednesday evening. He received a hearty welcome, and passed the hours until bedtime chatting with his parents and his sister, telling them of the affectionate regard in which he was now held by his parishioners.

It was not easy for the modest young clergyman to speak of his success; but the Baroness, who already knew something of this through letters from Charlotte, by persistent questioning drew from her son an account of the many expressions of love and gratitude which he had received from every quarter. One can imagine the joy this brought to her mother heart!

Very naturally, on this occasion there was no mention of the poor peddler girl who had been stopping at the house. And in the morning everyone was so preoccupied with preparations for the funeral that Karl Arthur was not informed then, either, of the pretty Dalar girl's visit at his home.

It was Colonel Ekenstedt's wish that his sister be laid away with all honours. Both the Bishop and the Governor had been requested to attend the funeral, as had also many of the first families of Karlstad—those who had had any social affiliation with the widow of the Provost. Among the guests was Ironmaster Schagerström of Stora Sjötorp. He had been invited because of his being related, through his deceased wife, to the sainted Provost. Touched by this recognition from persons who had every reason to feel ill-will toward him, he had thankfully accepted the invitation.

When to the chant of dirge and followed by a long procession of mourners, the body of the Widow Sjöberg had been borne to its last resting place, the funeral party returned to the house of mourning, where an elaborate feast awaited them. Needless to mention that the seriousness and solemnity befitting such an occasion were meticulously observed.

As a kinsman of the departed, Schagerström was placed near the hostess at table, which afforded him an opportunity to see and talk with this remarkable woman whom he had never met until then. The Baroness in her deep mourning made a poetic appeal, and though the sparkling gaiety and ready wit for which she was celebrated could not be brought into play now, her conversation was singularly entertaining and stimulating. Without the least hesitation Schagerström let himself be harnessed to the triumphal chariot of this enchantress. And he was glad to be able to afford her some slight

pleasure by telling her about the sermon her son had preached on the Sunday of the week before, and the effect it produced upon his hearers.

In the course of the dinner, young Ekenstedt rose and delivered an impressive oration, which won the admiration of all present. Everyone marvelled at the charming simplicity and, withal, compelling fervour of his utterance, also at the clear portrayal he gave of the admirable qualities of the departed, who, it seemed, had been very much attached to him. Nevertheless, Schagerström's attention, like that of most of the guests, wandered at times from the speaker to the speaker's mother, who was lost in worshipful admiration and wonder. He was informed by a table companion that the Baroness was fifty-six or fifty-seven years of age, and though her face did not precisely belie her years, he doubted whether any young belle could boast such speaking eyes and a smile so fascinating.

Thus far everything had gone well. But when the guests had risen from table to repair to the drawing room, where coffee was to be served, a slight mishap occurred in the kitchen. The housemaid who was to carry in the heavy coffee-tray chanced to break a glass and cut her hand so that it bled badly. No one out there seemed to know how to staunch the flow quickly, and, slight as the injury was, the girl could not carry the tray, with her hand dripping blood all the while.

The special waitresses refused to carry the heavy tray, and the housekeeper, in despair, turned to the buxom Dalar girl, who had duly appeared for the promised taste of the delectables, and bade her take in the tray. Without hesitation she picked it up; whereupon the housemaid bound a napkin round the injured hand and went along to see that the guests were served in their proper order.

A waitress with her tray does not ordinarily attract any special attention; but the instant the beautiful Dalar girl, in her colourful dress, appeared among the black-robed mourners, all eyes were drawn to her.

Karl Arthur Ekenstedt, like the others, turned to look. For a moment, he stared blankly, then he rushed up to her and seized hold of the tray.

"You shall not carry a tray in this house, Anna Svärd," he said, "you who are my affianced wife."

The beautiful girl looked at him—half-pleased, half-frightened.

"No, no!" She tried to fend him off. "Let me be till I'm through with this!"

By that time, all the guests were assembled in the drawing room. And now the Bishop and the Bishop's lady, the Governor and the Governor's wife, and everyone else saw the son of the house take the tray away from the girl and set it down on a near-by table.

"I repeat," he said, in a loud tone, "that my fiancée shall not carry a tray in this house!"

Whereupon a high, piercing voice rang out: "Karl Arthur, remember what day this is!"

It was the Baroness who had protested. She was seated at the far end of the room on a large sofa, before which stood a heavy divan table, and to right and left of her sat venerable and corpulent dowagers. She rose and began to thread her way across the

floor, but all were so interested in what was going on at the other end of the room that they did not move to let her pass.

Karl Arthur had taken the Dalar girl by the hand and was drawing her forward. The girl was shy, and held a hand to her eyes like a bashful child; but all the same she looked happy. In a moment he stood with her before the Bishop.

“I was not aware until now of my fiancée’s presence in my home,” he said. “But since she is here, allow me to present her to my Bishop and Superior. And I beg the favour of my Lord Bishop’s consent and blessing to my union with this young woman, who has promised to companion me on the path of duty and renunciation which it behooves a servant of Christ to tread.”

It could not be denied that the young clergyman by this bold stand—even though, for obvious reasons, it was inexpedient—gained general sympathy. His courageous recognition of the lowly bride he had chosen, like his impassioned words, won favour with many. His pale, fine-featured, sensitive face was stamped on this occasion by a manly strength one would not have attributed to him, and some of the men present had to concede that he was now treading a path which they would have hesitated to take.

Karl Arthur was about to say more, when from behind came an agonizing shriek. The Baroness, in working her way toward the group round the Bishop, had caught her foot in her long frock and fallen, striking her head against the sharp corner of a table and sustaining an ugly bruise on the forehead.

There were cries and commiserations and perhaps a sigh of relief from the Bishop, who had just been saved from a rather awkward situation. Karl Arthur dropped the hand of his fiancée and ran to help his mother to her feet. But that was easier said than done! The Baroness had not lost consciousness, as many another woman in her plight would have done; but she had had a bad fall, and could not rise. The Colonel, with his son, his son-in-law, and the family physician, lifted her gently into an easy chair, and carried her to her room, where the daughters and the capable housekeeper took charge; they undressed her and put her to bed.

The funeral guests stood about the drawing room in grave concern, unwilling to leave before they knew whether the Baroness had been seriously hurt. They saw the Colonel, the daughters, and the maids with anxious faces rush from room to room in quest of linen for bandages, liniment, and a strip of lath that would serve as a splint. By questioning the servants, the guests learned that the bruise on the forehead, which had looked alarmingly bad, was nothing serious; that the left arm had been fractured and must be carried in a sling for a time, but that it, too, would soon be all right. With the knee, however, it was a grave matter. The knee pan had been cracked, and for that to mend the Baroness would have to lie perfectly still; but how long, none could say.

After what they had heard, the guests knew that their hosts had enough to think of without being bothered with them, and they began to troop off. While the gentlemen were out in the hall putting on their coats and hats, the Colonel came hurrying out; he glanced about anxiously till he caught sight of Schagerström, who was just drawing on his gloves.

“Ironmaster Schagerström, if there’s nothing to prevent, I wish you would remain awhile.”

Schagerström looked mildly surprised, but quickly removed his hat and coat, and followed his host into the now almost deserted drawing room.

“I’d like to have a word with you, Ironmaster,” said the Colonel. “If time permits, please sit down till the worst confusion is over!”

Schagerström had rather a long wait. The son-in-law of the house, Lieutenant Arcker, meantime kept him company. The Lieutenant, who was all stirred up over what had happened, told the Ironmaster about the Dalar girl’s coming to Karlstad early in the week and her visit at the house. The poor housekeeper, very sorry now that she had asked the Dalar girl to serve the coffee, explained to any and everyone who would listen how she came to invite the girl to be present on the funeral day, and thus the Ironmaster soon understood how it all hung together.

The Colonel at last reappeared.

“Praise God! the bandages have been applied,” he said, “and Beata is now resting quietly. I hope she has passed through the worst of it.”

He sat down, drew out his handkerchief, and dried his eyes. Colonel Ekenstedt was a tall, well-set-up man with a round head, a ruddy complexion, and a big moustache. He looked the jolly and valiant soldier, and Schagerström was surprised at his sensibility to suffering.

“Ironmaster, I suppose you think me a poor wretch; but that woman has been the joy of my life. When anything happens to her, it’s all up with me!”

But Schagerström thought nothing of the kind. He who for nearly a fortnight had fought his unhappy love for Charlotte in loneliness at Stora Sjötorp was in just the right mood to understand the Colonel. He admired the whole-hearted way in which the man spoke of his love for his wife, and immediately felt a sympathy and respect for him which he had never felt for the son, though he conceded that the young man was gifted.

The Colonel, it seemed, wished to speak to Schagerström of Charlotte, that was why he had asked him to stay.

“I hope you will pardon an old man for meddling in your affairs,” he said, “but I have heard, of course, about your proposing to Charlotte, and I wish you to know that we here in Karlstad——” He stopped short. One of his daughters now stood in the doorway, peering anxiously into the room. “What’s the matter, Jaquette? Is she worse?”

“No, Father dear. But Mother keeps asking for Karl Arthur.”

“Why,” said the Colonel, “I thought he was still with her.”

“No, he hasn’t been there for some little time. He helped carry her in, since then we have not seen him.”

“Go see if he’s in his room!” said the Colonel. “He must have gone up to change his clothes.”

The instant she was gone, the Colonel again turned to Schagerström. “Where did I leave off, Ironmaster?”

“You were saying, Colonel, that here in Karlstad you——”

“Yes, to be sure. I wanted to tell you that we were certain from the first that Karl Arthur had made a mistake. My wife went down to Korskyrka to learn how the matter

stood, and she found that the whole thing——”

Just then the married daughter came to the door.

“Father, dear, have you seen Karl Arthur? Darling Mother is asking for him and can’t rest.”

“I must speak to Modig,” said the Colonel.

The daughter vanished, and the father, too uneasy now to pay any attention to Schagerström, paced the floor until his orderly appeared.

“Modig,” he said, “do you know whether that Dalar girl is still in the house?”

“Lord deliver us, Colonel! She came out of this room bawling and went off like a streak.”

“And the boy—I mean Dr. Ekenstedt?”

“He came to the kitchen shortly afterward looking for her, and when he heard that she had gone, he, too, rushed out into the street.”

“Modig, go down to the city at once and find him. Tell him that the Baroness is seriously ill and wants him!”

“All right, Colonel.”

The man was off, and the Colonel immediately picked up the thread of his broken thought.

“As soon as we knew the facts in the case, we determined to effect a reconciliation between the lovers. But first we had to get that Dalar girl out of the way, and then——” He checked himself—afraid that he had said something rude.

“I express myself badly, Ironmaster. My wife should have talked with you; she would have gone about it in the right way.”

Schagerström hastened to allay his fears. “The Herr Colonel expresses himself well enough. And I want to say that, as far as I’m concerned, I am already out of the way. Fröken Löwensköld has my consent to forbid the banns whenever she wishes.”

The Colonel rose, gave Schagerström a warm handclasp and thanked him profusely.

“This will delight Beata,” he said with fervour. “It is the best news that she could have.”

Before Schagerström could respond, Fru Eve Arcker was back in the room.

“Father, dear,” she said, “I don’t know what to do! Karl Arthur has been home, and he didn’t come in to see Mother!”

Fru Eve had stood at the bedroom window and seen her brother come up the street and had called back to the Baroness: “Ah! now I see Karl Arthur. He is uneasy about you, darling Mother, and comes running.” She had expected her brother to appear in the sick room at any moment, when Jaquette, who was over by the window, suddenly cried out: “O Heavenly Father! Karl Arthur is running back to town. He has only been home to change his clothes.”

At that the Baroness raised herself in bed. “No, no, Mother dear!” Fru Eve then cautioned her. “You must lie perfectly still, as the doctor said. I’ll bring Karl Arthur

back, never fear!" She ran to the window to call to her brother; the mother protested, but all the same, Fru Eve opened the window, and was leaning out to call to Karl Arthur, when the Baroness, in a stern voice, ordered her to shut the window again. She said emphatically that neither the daughters nor anyone else was to call Karl Arthur home. And now she had sent for the Colonel, presumably to give him the same instructions.

Colonel Ekenstedt rose at once and went to his wife, and Schagerström took this opportunity to inquire about the Baroness's condition.

"Mother suffers some pain," Fru Eve told him, "but that wouldn't matter to her if only Karl Arthur were here. Ah! if one could run down to the city and fetch him!"

"The Fru Baroness, I understand, is very devoted to her son," Schagerström remarked.

"Ah, yes, Ironmaster! Darling Mother thinks of no one but him. And now she is brooding because her son, though he knows she is ill, does not come to her, but runs after that Dalar girl. It is very hard on poor Mother, yet she won't even let us look for him!"

To which Schagerström replied: "I can understand how the Fru Baroness feels; but since she has not forbidden me to search for her son, I shall try to find him."

He was just on his way out when the Colonel came back.

"My wife would like to say a few words to you, Ironmaster; she wants to thank you." And with a certain ceremoniousness he took Schagerström by the hand, and led him into the sick room.

The Ironmaster, who but shortly before had so greatly admired the vivacious, fascinating woman of the world, was deeply affected as he saw her now a poor invalid, her head swathed in bandages, her face waxen pale and as if shrunken. She did not appear to be suffering, but over her features rested a stern, almost threatening look. A blow that hurt far more than the bodily injuries had kindled in her a proud, contemptuous wrath. Those about her, knowing what had called it forth, thought she could never forgive the son the lack of feeling he had shown that day. As Schagerström stepped to the bedside, she opened her eyes and gave him a long, searching look. Then she said, in a faint voice:

"Ironmaster, do you love Charlotte?"

Schagerström felt reluctant to bare his heart to a stranger. Nor could he lie to this sick and unhappy woman; so he said nothing.

The Baroness, however, did not seem to require an answer; she already knew what she needed to know. After a little she said:

"Ironmaster, do you think Charlotte still loves Karl Arthur?"

This time he could answer without hesitation that Charlotte loved her son with unflinching devotion.

As she looked at him now there were tears in her eyes.

"It is hard, Ironmaster," she said in the gentlest voice, "when the one you love has no love for you."

And Schagerström understood why she spoke thus to him: she knew how it felt to be spurned. Now she was no longer a stranger but a fellow sufferer; she felt for him, and he for her. To the lonely man, her sympathy was as balsam to a wound.

He slowly drew nearer and gently lifted the hand that rested on the coverlet, and kissed it reverently.

Once again she gave him a long look. Now it was not veiled by tears. That look penetrated the inmost recesses of his heart—searched and saw. And now she said to him, almost with affection: “Ironmaster, I wish you were my son!”

A slight tremor went through Schagerström. What had prompted the Baroness to say just that to him? Did she know, then, this woman whom he had met that day for the first time—did she know how, as a child, he had stood outside his mother’s door and wept—hungry for a little love? Did she know with what agony of dread he had approached his parents, fearing their glances of disapproval? Did she know that he would have been proud had the humblest peasant woman said that she wished she had a son like him? Did she know that she could have paid him no higher tribute?

In his overwhelming gratefulness he threw himself down beside the bed, and wept. In a few broken sentences, he tried to express what he felt.

The others must have thought him very impressionable. But how should they understand what her words meant to him? It seemed as if all his ugliness, his awkwardness, his stupidity had suddenly dropped away; he had not felt like this since the day his deceased wife had first told him that she loved him.

But the Baroness understood all that was at work in his heart, and she said once more, as if to dispel any lingering doubt:

“It is the truth, Ironmaster, that I wish you were my son.”

Then he knew that the only way in which he could repay her for the happiness she had given him was to bring her own son back to her. So he went out at once to seek for him.

The first person Schagerström met in the street was Lieutenant Arcker, who was out on the same errand; he also came upon the Colonel’s orderly and, with their help, he proceeded to take the necessary steps. The house where the Dalar girl lodged was easily found; but neither she nor Karl Arthur was there. All the other places where Dalar folk were wont to stop were thoroughly searched, and the night watchman was ordered to keep an eye out for Karl Arthur.

Soon darkness came, and it seemed impossible to go on with the search. In a city where the streets were so narrow and poorly lighted; where the buildings were crowded together; where whipping posts and houses of the strangest sort stood huddled like cattle in a snowstorm; where every yard held any number of good hiding places, the chances of spying out anyone were slight indeed.

Schagerström, however, continued to tramp the streets for several hours. It was long past midnight when he heard quick footsteps and guessed whose they were. By the reddish glimmer of a street lamp he recognized the slender form of young Ekenstedt.

Since Karl Arthur was going in the right direction, the Ironmaster did not speak, he simply followed him up the street all the way to the Ekenstedt house.

When at last he saw him go in he felt that his services were no longer needed. But a great curiosity to learn the outcome of the meeting between mother and son spurred him on. A few moments after Karl Arthur had entered the house, Schagerström opened the front door and stepped into the hall.

There stood the son of the house surrounded by his own people. Everyone, it seemed, had sat up for him—too uneasy to go to bed. The Colonel came bearing a light, and held it up to his son as if asking, “Is it you or someone else?” The two sisters came running down the stairs with their hair in curl papers, but fully dressed. The housekeeper and the orderly rushed out from the kitchen.

Karl Arthur, no doubt, had meant to steal quietly up to his room, and had got halfway on the staircase when he was stopped by the onrushing household.

As Schagerström entered, he saw the two sisters seize hold of the brother’s hands and try to drag him along with them.

“Come to dear Mother!” they said. “You don’t know how she has been pining for you!”

“Is it right and proper for you to be running about the town,” roared the Colonel, “when you know that your mother is ill?”

Karl Arthur was still on the stair. His face was as if cut in stone; he showed neither embarrassment nor regret, but said quite coolly:

“Does Papa wish me to go to Mamma now, at once? Wouldn’t it be better to wait till morning?”

“Gad, boy! you must go to her now. She has fretted herself into a high fever, lying there waiting for you!”

“Pardon me, Father, but it is no fault of mine.” There was something downright hostile in the son’s attitude, and the Colonel, wishing to avert a war of words, said in a mild, conciliatory tone:

“Just let her see that you are at home. Go in and kiss her, and by morning all will be well.”

“I cannot kiss her,” the son declared.

“You damned——” The Colonel checked himself. “Say straight out what you mean! No, wait a bit!—Come with me!”

He led him into his office and shut the door on the group of curious listeners. In a moment he came out again, went up to Schagerström, and said to him:

“I should be very glad, Ironmaster, if you would be present at our conference.”

Schagerström followed him at once, and the door was closed again. The Colonel sat down at his writing table, then turned to the son. “Now, tell me quickly what has come over you!”

“Well, Father, since you say that Mother has fever, I suppose I must make my confession to you, though I very well know that she is the real offender.”

“May we hear what you’re driving at?” asked the father.

“What I want to say is that after to-day I shall never again set foot in my parents’ house.”

“Whew!” said the Colonel. “And the reason?”

“*This!*” Karl Arthur drew from his pocket a roll of bank notes and slapped it down on the table in front of the Colonel.

“Oho! So she couldn’t hold her tongue.”

“Oh, yes,” said Karl Arthur, “she kept silence as long as it was possible for her to do so. We had been sitting in the cemetery for hours, she and I, and all she would tell me was that she must go away and would never see me again. It was not until I accused her of having found another sweetheart here in Karlstad that she finally told me how my parents had bribed her to give me up, and how my father, moreover, had threatened to disinherit me if I married her. What could the girl do? She had accepted the two hundred riksdalers you offered her. I was rather amused to find that my parents had set so high a price upon my person.”

“Well,” said the Colonel with a shrug, “we also promised that she should have five times that amount to set up house when she married some other fellow.”

Karl Arthur replied, with a slight laugh, that she had mentioned that also. Then he became serious and said with rising indignation:

“And it is my own father and my own mother who treat me thus! Two weeks ago my mother came to see me at Korskyrka and we talked of my prospective marriage and my plans for the future. I told her then that Providence had sent this young girl to me; that I counted upon her as a helpmate with whom I could lead a life in accordance with the will of God. She was my hope. My life’s happiness depended upon my having her for wife. When I told my mother that, she seemed to be touched and said that I was right. And now, a fortnight after, I find that she has been trying to part us. What am I to think of such ruthlessness—such duplicity? Should I not shudder at having to call such a woman Mother?”

The Colonel shrugged his shoulders, as if insensible of any guilt and incapable of remorse. Then he said:

“Oh, Beata felt sorry for you because Charlotte had played you a mean trick, and she didn’t want to rail at you about your new troth. Naturally, we knew that you had jumped from the frying pan into the fire, but thought it best to let matters take their course for a time. Then the heaven-sent one flew right into the mouth of us poor sinners! Beata engaged her in order to find out what sort she was. And, indeed, she’s an excellent person in many respects, but she can’t read or write; besides, she smokes a pipe and, as for cleanliness . . . Well, my boy, we tried to settle it in the best way. You would have been satisfied had you allowed yourself time to come to your senses. But the whole play was spoiled by that blessed person’s appearing with the coffee-tray.”

“Father, can you not see what it was?”

“Certainly, I can see that it was damned unfortunate.”

“I see in it the finger of God. This woman whom the Lord has chosen as a mate for me, He again sent across my path. And, moreover, I see His just retribution. When I asked the Bishop to bless our union, my mother rushed forward to prevent it. She thought that feigning to stagger and fall would be the most effective interruption. Her manœuvre succeeded all too well. . . . God intervened!”

The father’s coolness now deserted him. “For shame, boy!” he cried. “How dare you accuse your mother of such craftiness!”

“Beg pardon, Father, but I have had occasion of late to prove woman’s deceit. Charlotte and my mother have taught my heart a lesson it will not soon forget!”

The Colonel thrummed on the table a moment, then he said:

“I’m glad you mentioned Charlotte. I was just going to speak to you of her. You can never make me believe that she threw you over in order to marry a rich man. She cares more for you than for all the wealth of the world. I believe that it was all your fault and that she shouldered the blame so that we, your parents, would not be angry at you, and that you might escape the condemnation of others. What have you to say to that?”

“She allowed the banns to be published.”

“Reflect, Karl Arthur! Clear your mind of all delusions as to Charlotte’s perfidy. Don’t you understand that she blamed herself in order to protect you? She let the world think the engagement was broken at her behest. But think back! Search your heart! Was it not you who broke the troth?”

Karl Arthur stood silent awhile; he really seemed to be searching his heart, as his father had bidden him. Suddenly he turned to Schagerström, and said:

“Ironmaster, how came you to send that bouquet of flowers? Had you received any message from Charlotte on Monday afternoon? What was the Dean’s errand to you?”

Schagerström answered the questions in their order. “The flowers were sent in token of my profound respect. I received no message from Fröken Löwensköld on Monday. The Dean’s errand was to return my call of the previous day.”

Again Karl Arthur was lost in thought. At length he said:

“In that case, it would appear that my father is right.”

His two listeners drew a sigh of relief. It was a gracious admission of an error in judgment. No ordinary man would have done a thing like that.

“Well, Son, then—— But first I must tell you that Ironmaster Schagerström has promised to forego all claim——”

“Ironmaster Schagerström need make no sacrifice on my account,” Karl Arthur interrupted. “Please understand, Father, that I shall never make up with Charlotte. I love another.”

The Colonel brought his fist down on the table. “One can’t get anywhere with you! So you attach no value whatever to such steadfast devotion and such noble sacrifice?”

“I regard it as a providence of God that the bond between Charlotte and me has been broken.”

“I understand,” said the Colonel bitterly. “At the same time, no doubt you thank God that the bond between you and your parents has also been broken.”

The young man treated this with silence.

“Mark my words!” the Colonel continued. “You are on your way to destruction. And we are to blame. Beata humoured and spoiled you till you came to regard yourself as a demigod, and I allowed it simply because I couldn’t bear to oppose her in any way. And now you are repaying her just as I thought you would. I have felt all the while that it would end like this; but it’s hard, all the same, when it comes!”

He sighed heavily; then he said in a mild voice:

“Look here, Son! Now that you have foiled all our wicked designs, won’t you go in and kiss your mother to ease her mind?”

“If, as you say, I have foiled your evil designs, am I therefore to forget the pernicious bent of mind which characterizes my nearest of kin? Wherever I turn, I find nothing but love of the world and all that pertains thereto: folly and deceit!”

“Don’t worry about that, Karl Arthur! We are old-fashioned folk; we have our piety, as you have yours.”

“Father, I cannot.”

“Well,” said the Colonel, “I’ve settled my account with you; but she, she—ah! you must know that she thinks you love her. I beg of you, Karl Arthur, for her sake, just for her sake. . . !”

“The only kindness I can show my mother is to go away without telling her how my heart has been wounded by her perfidy.”

The Colonel rose to his feet. “You—you don’t know what love is!”

“I am a servant of the truth,” Karl Arthur declared. “I cannot kiss my mother.”

“Go to bed!” said the old man. “Sleep on the matter!”

“The conveyance is ordered for four o’clock, and we have only a quarter-hour till then.”

“The conveyance can come back at ten,” said the Colonel. “Do as I say—sleep on it.”

Now for the first time Karl Arthur seemed to weaken a bit. “If my father and my mother will turn from their worldly ways, if they will live like humble folk; if my sisters will serve the poor and the sick——”

“None of your impertinent cant!”

“This cant, as you call it, is the word of God.”

“Bosh!” said the Colonel.

Karl Arthur raised his arms toward heaven, like a preacher in the pulpit. “Then forgive me, O Lord, that I cast off these my fleshly parents! Let nothing that is theirs, neither their cares nor their love, their estates or their money, touch me! Help me, Lord! Deliver me from these creatures of sin, that I may live in Thy glorious freedom!”

The Colonel had listened impassively. Now he said: "The god you believe in is a merciless god, and he will surely grant your prayer. And when some day you come to my door, begging and pleading, you may be sure that I, too, will remember your prayer."

That was the last that was said between father and son. Karl Arthur now quietly left the room, and the Colonel was alone with Schagerström.

For a few moments the old man sat with his head bowed on his hands. Presently he turned to Schagerström.

"I wish you would tell Charlotte what has happened. I can't write about it. Tell her everything, Ironmaster, everything. I want her to know that we tried to help her, though we failed miserably. And say to her also that she is the only person in the world who can help my poor wife and my poor son."

CHAPTER XXI

SATURDAY MORNING

IT WAS on a Monday, just fourteen days after Schagerström had proposed, that Charlotte by chance discovered that Thea Sundler was in love with Karl Arthur. The peculiar feeling that came to her then, of at last having in her hands a weapon by means of which she might regain her lost happiness—that feeling persisted for several days. By Tuesday's post she had a letter from the Baroness, telling her that everything was going surprisingly well, and that very soon the misunderstandings would be cleared away. All that heartened her; which, indeed, was well.

On Wednesday she heard that Karl Arthur had gone to Karlstad to attend his aunt's funeral, and felt that she could count upon the Baroness to take advantage of the opportunity to speak to him of her. Her innocence of any intrigue would then be established. Perhaps he would be touched by her sacrifice and come back to her. She had no conception as to how the Baroness would work the miracle, but she knew that the Colonel's wife could find ways and means where things looked hopelessly black to others.

Despite her great faith in the Baroness, the days while Karl Arthur was away at Karlstad were exceedingly anxious ones. She was tossed between fear and hope, and wondered what the Baroness would do. Charlotte, who saw Karl Arthur every day, could not deny that his love for her was dead. Though they sat at the same table, he would look beyond her, as if she were not there. This was not a misunderstanding; this could not be explained away. With him it was over. His love was like a sawed-off branch; no power on earth could reattach it to the tree and make it grow again.

Karl Arthur was expected home on Friday, and that, of course, was the most trying day of all. From early morning till late afternoon, Charlotte sat at the window of the dining room that gave on the wing—watching and waiting. For the thousandth time she went over in her mind all that had happened—searched and probed and was none the wiser. It looked as if she would be kept in suspense the whole day. However, at four o'clock, Karl Arthur returned. He went straight to the wing, came out in a moment, walked briskly toward the gate without casting a glance at the main dwelling, and set off on the road to the church town.

So it was Thea Sundler he wanted to see and not Charlotte. This, then, was the result of the Baroness's efforts! Charlotte could but say to herself that they had failed.

All hope seemed to die within her. She avowed that never again would she allow herself to be deluded into thinking that there was any help or salvation for her.

And yet, there must have been some hope left in her heart; for when the housemaid came to her room at about six o'clock on Saturday morning with greetings from Dr. Ekenstedt, who asked if he might speak with her, Charlotte instantly interpreted the request to see her at the early breakfast as evidence that he still loved her; that he longed to resume the old happy relations; the old ways.

She felt confident now that the Baroness had kept her word, and that the miracle had been wrought. She ran down the stairs and into the dining room so fast that her curls flew about her ears. But one glance at Karl Arthur told her that she was wrong. He rose as she entered, but there were no embraces or kisses, no outpourings of gratitude for her shielding of him. He stood awkwardly silent for two or three minutes, as if she had come upon him so suddenly that he had not had time to collect his thoughts. Finally he said:

“It seems that you, Charlotte, out of sheer compassion, assumed the blame for the break between us; that you went so far as to accept Schagerström’s proposal of marriage and to have the banns for you and him read in church in order to lend plausibility to the deception. You probably meant well, Charlotte, and thought you were doing me a great service. For my sake you have had to suffer much slander and revilement, and I understand that I owe you a debt of thanks.”

Charlotte drew herself up and stiffened her neck as she had not done in weeks, and her face assumed a stony expression. She made no answer.

He continued: “Your mode of action, it appears, was prompted in the first place by a desire to shield me from the wrath of my parents. If such was your hope, I must tell you that your efforts were futile. During my recent visit to Karlstad, dissension arose between me and my parents over my matrimonial plans, which led to a complete break. I am no longer son of theirs, and they are no longer my parents.”

“Why, Karl Arthur!” cried Charlotte, all fire and life now, “whatever are you saying? Your mother—have you broken with your own mother?”

“My dear Charlotte, my mother tried to bribe Anna Svärd to marry some man of her home town. By underhanded methods, she sought to wreck my life’s happiness. She has no understanding whatever of the things that are vital to me. My mother wishes me to renew the bond with you. In fact, she went to the trouble of inviting Schagerström to the funeral that she might have opportunity to ask him to release you. But I need not go into all that, as you, of course, are already familiar with the details of my parents’ plot. You bounded right merrily into the room, thinking, no doubt, that the pretty plan had worked out successfully.”

“I know nothing about your mother’s plans, Karl Arthur—nothing. The only thing she has told me is that she does not believe the lies Thea Sundler has been circulating about me. When I knew you had been to Karlstad, I thought that perhaps you had learned the truth. But let us not talk of me! Look here, Karl Arthur, you can’t be angry at your mother! Won’t you go back at once and make up with her? Ah, say you will!”

“How can I? To-morrow is Sunday, and I have to preach.”

“Then write her a few lines and let me go. Remember that your mother is old. She has retained her youthful spirit because of her joy in you. You have been youth and health to her. The instant you desert her, she will become an old and broken woman. It would be the end of her gaiety, her delightful banter. She would become more dour, more bitter than anyone. Oh, Karl Arthur, I fear that this will kill her! You have been her god, you can give her life or death. Let me go to her with a word from you!”

“I know all that, Charlotte, but I do not wish to write. My mother was ill when I left Karlstad; my father begged me to make up with her, and I refused. She has lied and played the hypocrite.”

“But, Karl Arthur, if she has dissembled, she has done so only for your sake. I don’t know in what way your parents have offended you; but whatever they may have done, it was for your welfare. Such things one must forgive. Can’t you think of your mother as she was when you were a little chap? What would your home have been without her? When you came home from school with good marks, what satisfaction would it have been to you if your mother had not been so pleased with them? And later, when you returned from college for the Easter and Christmas holidays, where would have been the joy had your mother not been there to welcome you? And when you sat down to the Christmas feast would you have had any pleasure if your mother had not thought-out little surprises? It was she who frosted the Yule pudding and trimmed the Yule-buck. Think of these things, Karl Arthur!”

“I sat alone by the roadside all day yesterday, Charlotte, and thought of my mother. From a worldly standpoint, she has been a good mother. I concede that this is true according to the world’s idea and your idea of goodness. But I cannot say the same of her according to God’s way and mine of judging. I have asked myself what Christ would have said of such a mother.”

“Christ—” Charlotte’s throat suddenly tightened so that she could scarcely utter the words—“Christ would have looked beyond the outer and incidental. He would have seen that such a mother could have followed Him to the foot of the Cross, aye, and let herself be crucified in His stead. He would have judged accordingly.”

“Perhaps you are right, Charlotte. I dare say my mother would die for me, but she would never let me live my own life. Charlotte, my mother would not allow me to serve God; she would expect me to serve her and her world; therefore she and I must part.”

“It is not Christ Who commands you to break with your mother!” Charlotte exclaimed indignantly. “It is Thea Sundler who makes you think that your mother and I _____”

Karl Arthur stopped her with a gesture. “I knew,” he said, “that this discussion was going to be an unpleasant one, and would have preferred to avoid it; but it was the very person whom you have just named and whom you choose to hate who prevailed upon me to tell you the result of my parents’ efforts.”

“Oh, really!” said Charlotte. “Well, I’m not surprised. She knew that I should feel unhappy enough to weep tears of blood.”

“Construe her motive as you will, it was she, at all events, who intimated to me that I should thank you for what you had wished to do for me.”

Charlotte, knowing that nothing would be gained by angry protests, controlled her feelings and went about it in a different way.

“Forgive me,” she said, “for being so hasty! Indeed, I had no wish to hurt you; but you know that I have always loved your mother, and I think it is dreadful that she who

lies sick and longs for a word from you does not get it. Really, Karl Arthur, wouldn't you like me to go? It would not imply that you wish to make up with me, too."

"Certainly you may go, Charlotte."

"But not without a message from you."

"Don't ask me again!" snapped Karl Arthur. "It's useless."

Into her pretty face came a dark, accusing look, and she regarded him fixedly. "That you would dare!"

"Dare? What do you mean, Charlotte?"

"You said awhile ago that you were going to preach to-morrow."

"Yes, of course."

"Do you remember the time at Upsala when you were afraid to take an examination because you had been rude to your mother?"

"I'll never forget it!"

"But you seem to have forgotten. And I say to you now, that never again will you preach as you have preached the last two Sundays until you make your peace with your mother."

Karl Arthur laughed. "Now, Charlotte, don't try to frighten me."

"I'm not trying to frighten you. I am only telling you how it will be: Every time you enter a pulpit you'll think of this, that you refused to be reconciled to your mother, and it will take from you all power, all inspiration."

"My dear Charlotte, do you think to frighten me as one frightens a child?"

"Remember my words!" said the young girl. "Think of them now, while there is time! By to-morrow or the day after, it may be too late."

She moved toward the door. Before he could answer, she was gone.

* * *

After breakfast the Dean asked Charlotte to come to his study.

"Schagerström must have driven by the house last evening," he said, "for his groom came to the kitchen with a large envelope addressed to me, which contained a lengthy epistle to you, Charlotte, also a short note to me, requesting that I prepare you for the sad news in his letter."

"I am not unprepared, Uncle," said Charlotte. "I have talked with Karl Arthur to-day, and already know that he has broken with his parents and that his mother is ill."

"What are you telling me, child?" The Dean was dumbfounded.

"I can't talk about it now, Uncle." Charlotte patted the old man's arm. "But let me have my letter." She took it from his hand and went up to her own room.

Schagerström's letter gave quite a full account of what had taken place recently, especially on the day of the funeral. From the hastily scribbled lines, Charlotte got a pretty clear conception of all that had transpired: The Dalar girl's visit to Karlstad; her unexpected appearance on the day of the funeral; the Baroness's unfortunate fall; her

vain longing for her son; Schagerström's visit to the sick room; the search for the son; the heated altercation in the Colonel's office between father and son; and last, the writer mentioned the fact that the Colonel had requested him to tell Charlotte all this, and quoted, word for word, what the Colonel had said as to Charlotte's being the only person in the world who could help his poor wife and his poor son.

He wrote further:

I promised to carry out the Colonel's wishes; but on returning to my quarters it occurred to me at once that I ought not to intrude myself upon you, good Fröken, and therefore I decided to pass the short space still left of the night inditing these lines. I beg your indulgence for there being so many. Perhaps it was the certainty that they would be read by you that set the pen running. It is now well into the morning, and my travelling carriage has been waiting an hour or two; but I must add a few words more.

I have observed young Ekenstedt on various occasions, and at times have found him a gifted and noble soul who gives promise of future greatness. But sometimes, too, I have found him hard, almost cruel, credulous, irascible, and lacking in sound judgment. My own supposition is that the young man is open to an evil influence which, in some insidious way, is undermining his character.

You, dear Fröken, are now cleared in the eyes of your fiancé of all suspicion. As you and he see each other every day, he surely cannot remain insensitive to your great charm. Without a doubt, good feelings between you two will be restored. At all events, it is the sincere hope of your humble servant that your happiness, which through me has been blighted, may soon bloom anew. Permit a man who loves you and wishes you a perfect happiness to warn you against the *influence* to which I referred, and counsel you to remove it if possible.

And permit me one word more. I need not tell you that the Colonel's prayer is also mine. For the Baroness Ekenstedt I have a boundless affection, and if, to save her life, you should have need of my help, you may count upon me, even to the supreme sacrifice.

Your humble and devoted servant,

GUSTAF HENRIK SCHAGERSTRÖM.

When Charlotte had read the letter through twice, she sat for a long moment wondering what these two men, the Colonel and the Ironmaster, hoped for her.

What did the Colonel mean by his message? and why had Schagerström taken the trouble to dash off in such haste this long letter to her?

Suddenly she remembered that the next day was the one for the third, and last, reading of the banns. Did Schagerström think that by his letting her know all this, she would allow their banns to be published once again, and thus make them legally binding?

However, she quickly absolved him from suspicion of any such intent. He had not thought of himself, or he would have written more guardedly. As it was, he had expressed himself quite freely about Karl Arthur; had unwittingly laid himself open to the suspicion that his communication had been prompted by desire to injure a rival.

What, then, did he and the Colonel think she could do? She knew well enough what they expected of her; they wanted her to bring the son back to his mother. But how could she? Did they suppose that she had any power over Karl Arthur? Had she not already tried to persuade him? Had she not exhausted every argument at her command—and all to no effect?

Closing her eyes, she saw, as it were before her, the Baroness lying with head bandaged and face ashen-pale and drawn. She saw the look of proud, contemptuous wrath; she heard her say to the man who, like herself, suffered from slighted love, “It is hard when the one you love has no love for you.”

Charlotte suddenly rose, folded the letter, and slipped it into her pocket, thinking it might be a protection to her, and a help. In a few moments, she was on her way to the village.

When she came to the hedge enclosing the organist’s garden, she paused a moment and prayed a silent prayer. She was going to try to persuade Thea Sundler to send Karl Arthur home to his mother; for Thea alone could do it. Charlotte prayed God to fill her heart with patience that she might soften this woman who hated her, and win her to her cause.

She had the good fortune to find Fru Sundler at home, and quite alone. She asked whether Thea could give her a few minutes of her time. They were soon sitting vis-à-vis in Fru Sundler’s cosy parlour.

Charlotte, feeling that she ought to start conversation with an apology for having cut off those curls of Thea’s, said:

“I was so distraught that day; but of course it was dreadful of me to do such a thing.”

Fru Sundler was extremely affable. She understood Charlotte’s feelings perfectly, she said; she, herself, she added, had still greater cause to ask forgiveness. She had believed Charlotte guilty and judged her harshly. But from this time forth she would do all that lay in her power to reestablish Charlotte’s honour.

Charlotte, with equal politeness, thanked her for the promise, and said that she had something on her mind just then more pressing than the righting of her own wrongs.

Whereupon she told Thea Sundler about the Baroness’s accident. Karl Arthur, she said, probably was not aware that his mother had suffered such grave injuries, or surely he would not have left Karlstad without saying a kind word to her.

Thea now became very reserved. She had found that Karl Arthur, in the more important moves, was guided by some Divine inspiration. In all his doings, he walked in the ways of God.

Charlotte reddened slightly at this, but said nothing that might give offence. She merely stated that it was her firm conviction that the Baroness would never recover

from Karl Arthur's break with her. Did not Thea think it dreadful that he would have his mother's death on his conscience?

Fru Sundler replied with condescending sweetness that she had the faith that God's protecting Hand would rest upon both mother and son; that Providence perhaps would lead dear Tante Ekenstedt into a more earnest Christianity.

Charlotte saw again the ashen-pale face with its look of scorn, and feared that this was hardly the way to make the Baroness a more devout Christian. However, she was careful not to offer any unwise comment. She had come, she said, simply to beg Fru Sundler to use her influence with Karl Arthur to bring about a reconciliation between him and his mother.

Fru Sundler now spoke in a low voice, more sibilant, more oilily meek than ever. Well, perhaps she had some little influence with Karl Arthur; but in a matter of such import she dared not use it. This he must decide himself.

"She does not want to do it," thought Charlotte. "It's useless trying to appeal to her sympathy; she will do nothing unless there's something to be gained."

Charlotte rose at once, said a most polite Good-bye, and went toward the door. Fru Sundler, of course, accompanied her, airily unfolding, meanwhile, her ideas as to the responsibility which rested with one who had the good fortune to be in the confidence of Karl Arthur.

Charlotte, her hand on the latch, now turned and cast a glance round the room.

"You really have a very pleasant parlour," she said. "I don't wonder that Karl Arthur likes it so well here!"

Fru Sundler, not understanding the drift, kept silence.

"I can picture how you pass your evenings here," Charlotte continued. "Your husband sits at the piano, you stand over there and sing, and Karl Arthur drops into one of these nice easy chairs and listens to the music."

"Yes," said Fru Sundler, still uncertain whither this was leading; "we have, as you say, very pleasant evenings."

"And sometimes perhaps Karl Arthur, too, contributes to the entertainment?" said Charlotte. "Reads a poem or talks about the little gray parsonage of his dreams?"

"Yes. My husband and I are very happy that Karl Arthur honours our humble home with his visits."

"If nothing comes between, this happiness may continue for many years, perhaps; Karl Arthur is not likely to marry his Dalar girl very soon. He will find it rather dull and lonely at the deanery, and may need a pleasant refuge like this."

Fru Sundler was all attention now. She felt that there was something back of the girl's remarks, but what, she could not make out.

"If I were to remain at the deanery," said Charlotte with a slight laugh, "then perhaps I could furnish him some diversion, now and then, for an idle hour. I know, to be sure, that he has ceased to love me, but we need not live a dog-and-cat life on that account. For instance, I might help him establish his orphanage. When people see each other every day, they have many interests in common."

“Naturally. But, Charlotte, do you really intend to leave the deanery?”

“It is hard to tell. You know, of course, that I have thought some of marrying Schagerström.”

With that, Charlotte opened the door. When out in the hall, she noticed that a shoe lace had come undone and bent down to retie it. For safety’s sake, she also retied the other string. “I must give her time to think it over,” she said to herself. “If she loves him, she won’t let me go. But if she doesn’t. . . ?”

While she stood bending over her shoe Fru Sundler came out into the hall.

“Dear Charlotte, would you mind stepping inside again? It has just occurred to me that this is your first visit to my home. May I not offer you a glass of raspberry juice? You must not leave without having some refreshment. That would be robbing the house of the pleasure of hospitality, as the saying goes.”

Charlotte, having finished with her shoe laces, straightened up and thanked the hostess kindly. Indeed, she had no objection to waiting in the cosy little parlour while Fru Sundler ran down to the cellar for the cordial. “Thea is no fool,” thought Charlotte. That at all events was some consolation.

Fru Sundler was gone rather long. Charlotte took it as a good omen, and bided quietly and patiently. In her eyes was the look of a fisherman when he sees the fish circling round the baited hook.

However, in due time the hostess appeared with the cordial and some small cakes. Charlotte poured herself a little of the dark raspberry liquid, took a ginger cookie, and nibbled at it while listening to Fru Sundler’s excuses for having been gone so long.

“What a delicious gingersnap!” Charlotte ejaculated. “It must have been made by your mother’s recipe. She is said to have been a veritable wizard of the culinary art. It’s fortunate for you, Thea, that you are such a good cook. Karl Arthur, I’m sure, has better fare here than at the deanery.”

“No, indeed!” said Thea. “You must remember that we are poor folk. But, Charlotte, let us not talk of such trivial things! We must think of poor, dear Tante Ekenstedt. May I speak quite frankly to you?”

“It was for that I came, dear Thea,” Charlotte replied in her blandest tone.

Neither of them raised her voice, but lowered it, rather. They sat quietly sipping their cordial and nibbling their cakes, but their hands trembled like those of eager chess players, when near the end of a long game.

“Then I’ll tell you honestly, Charlotte, that I think Karl Arthur is a little afraid of his mother. Not so much of herself, perhaps; for she is too far away, and has few opportunities to influence him directly; but he has marked that she is striving to bring you and him together again. Pardon my saying so, but it is this he fears more than anything.”

Charlotte smiled to herself. “So that’s how we’re to take it!—Ah, no, Thea is not stupid!”

“Then you really believe, Thea, that you could persuade Karl Arthur to go to Karlstad and make it right with his mother; that is, if he were assured that it would not

entail any consequences as regards myself?"

Fru Sundler gave a shrug. "It is merely a supposition," she said. "Perhaps he is also a bit afraid of his own weakness. You are a very attractive woman, Charlotte, and I don't see how a young man would be able to resist one who is as beautiful as you are."

"You mean——"

"Ah, Charlotte, it's hard to say it, but I think that if Karl Arthur had something definite to hold to——"

"You mean that if to-morrow there is a third reading of the banns for Schagerström and me, he would feel safe?"

"That, of course, would be a good thing. But, Charlotte, an announcement is not a fulfilment. The wedding might be postponed indefinitely, and you would continue to reside at the deanery year after year."

Charlotte set her glass back on the tray rather hastily. She knew when she came that she would have to pay a high price if Thea was to allow Karl Arthur to go to his mother, and thought it would be sufficient with the banns.

"I would suggest"—Fru Sundler spoke now in whispers—"that you go home at once and write a little note to Schagerström requesting that he come to the deanery to-morrow, immediately after Service, to be married, then——"

"Impossible!" It came out like a desperate cry for mercy. It was the only time during the entire conversation that the young girl had betrayed her sufferings.

Fru Sundler went right on, regardless of the other's protest. "I don't know what may or may not seem impossible to you. I'm only saying that, if you were to write such a letter and send it to Stora Sjötorp by a reliable messenger, we could have a reply within five or six hours. If the answer is satisfactory, I will do everything in my power to induce Karl Arthur to go."

"But if you should fail?"

"I have a warm affection for Tante Ekenstedt, Charlotte, and am really distressed about her. If I can only dispel Karl Arthur's fears in the matter already mentioned, I don't think that I shall fail. In fact, I'm confident that Karl Arthur will leave for Karlstad to-morrow as soon as the service is over. Before the marriage is solemnized, you will hear that he has gone."

It was a clear and carefully thought-out plan, with no escape gaps or loopholes. Charlotte sat looking down. Could she do it? It meant living a whole lifetime with a man whom she did not love. Could she? . . . Her hand fumbled over the letter in her skirt pocket. . . . Yes, she could!

She took up the glass again and drained it at one draught, in order to clear her throat.

"I will let you know what Schagerström answers as soon as possible," she said, and rose to go.

CHAPTER XXII

SATURDAY AFTERNOON AND EVENING

WHEN something difficult lies before one, it is well to be able to say: "This is a necessary thing. I know why I do it." The strong dread is allayed by the clear conviction that one cannot do otherwise. It is a true saying that when once a thing has been done, and there is no altering it, one finds it quite easy to bear.

Charlotte wrote to Schagerström immediately upon her return to the deanery. It was only a few lines, but they cost her a deal of effort. Here is what she finally managed to set down:

In consideration of the last lines in the Ironmaster's letter, I should like to know whether the Ironmaster can come to the deanery to-morrow at about two o'clock, to have the Dean pronounce us man and wife.

I beg for a word, in reply, by the bearer.

The Ironmaster's humble servant,
CHARLOTTE LÖWENSKÖLD.

After obtaining the Dean's permission to send the note by his coachman, she began to relate to the two old friends what had happened that morning, to prepare them for what the morrow might bring forth.

"Never mind!" said the Dean's wife. "You can tell us about it some other time. Go up to your room now and rest awhile. You look like a ghost!"

The old lady helped her upstairs, made her stretch out on a sofa, and spread a shawl over her. "Now don't be uneasy," she said. "I'll waken you in time for dinner."

For a while the thoughts churned in Charlotte's head faster and more furiously than ever; but gradually they quieted down, as if understanding at last that there was no need to bother further, that the matter had been settled once and for all. Before long, the poor girl dropped off to sleep.

When dinner was served, the Fru Dean looked in as she had promised; but finding the girl asleep, she did not disturb her; nor was she awakened until the coachman returned from Stora Sjötorp with Schagerström's answer.

The Ironmaster had written just the one line:

Your humble servant will be proud and happy to come.

The scrap of a note was immediately sent to Fru Sundler. Now Charlotte began once more to recount her experiences of the forenoon. And again she was interrupted. This time it was an urgent message from her sister, asking that Charlotte come to her at once, as she had had a severe hemorrhage that morning.

"Only misfortunes happen nowadays!" sighed the old lady. "It's consumption, I fear. She has had the look of it for a long time. Of course you must go to her, child. I

only hope it won't be too great a strain on you!"

"No, indeed, Tante," said Charlotte, who hurriedly got ready to go to the village for the second time that day.

She found the sister sitting up in a straight-backed armchair in her parlour, with all the children about her. Two stood bending over her solicitously; two sat on a stool at her feet, and the two youngest, who knew nothing of sickness or peril, sprawled on the floor. The four who had arrived at some degree of understanding were anxious and fearful. It looked as if they had constituted themselves a guard round the mother, to protect her against a fresh attack. When Charlotte came, the eldest boy put up a warning hand and said in a whisper:

"Mother mustn't move or talk."

There was no fear that Charlotte would tempt the patient to speak; but the instant she entered the room her throat contracted; she had to struggle for breath to keep from crying.

Fru Romelius's parlour was a small, bare-looking room with a few fine old pieces of birchwood furniture, heirlooms she had brought from her parental home. But, as there was nothing else in the room, not a strip of carpet on the floor, nor a potted plant in the window, the place had always seemed dreadfully cheerless to Charlotte. On none of her visits to the sister had she been allowed to enter any of the other rooms; and she had suspected from the first that Marie Louise's living quarters were very poor and shabby, and that that was why they had always been closed to her.

Physicians were usually quite well off. But Dr. Romelius, who passed most of his time at the tavern, drinking, earned next to nothing, and let wife and children live in want. It was only natural that the doctor's wife, who loved her husband and feared the sister might censure him, had always kept her at a certain distance lest she should get an insight into the true state of affairs.

When Charlotte saw how Marie Louise, ill as she was, still received her in the parlour, she was deeply moved. It was for the sake of the husband; her one thought was to shield him.

Charlotte stepped softly over to the sister and kissed her on the forehead. "Ah, Marie Louise!" she whispered. "Dear Marie Louise!"

The sister looked up with a faint smile, inclined her head toward the children, then looked again at Charlotte.

"Yes, of course," said Charlotte, understanding. "See here, children." She spoke now in such a brisk and positive tone she wondered where it came from. "Fru Forsius has sent you some cakes. They are out in the hall, in my reticule. Come along and you shall see!"

Thus she tempted the children away from the room, divided the cakes among them, and sent them out into the yard to play. Whereupon she went back to the sister, sat down on the stool at her feet, took her thin, toil-calloused hands between her own, and laid them against her cheek.

"Now, dear heart, they are out of doors; so tell me what you would like me to do."

“If I should die——” The sick woman was afraid to go on lest she might start coughing.

“Ah, to be sure,” said Charlotte, “you are not to talk! You were going to ask me to take care of your children in case you should pass away. That I promise you, Marie Louise.”

The sister nodded, and thanked her with a smile. Her eyes filled, as she said in a voice so faint it was scarcely more than a whisper: “I knew that you would help me.”

“She does not question how I am to take care of so many children,” thought Charlotte, who in the presence of this acute misery had forgotten all that she herself had been through in the forenoon. Suddenly, it flashed across her mind that she could take care of the children; she would be well-to-do; she was going to marry Schagerström.

Immediately another thought arose in her mind: “Perhaps it was in order that I might be able to help Marie Louise that things have gone as they have?”

It was the first time Charlotte had thought of a union with Schagerström with any degree of satisfaction. Hitherto she had simply accepted her fate with meek resignation.

She offered to put the sister to bed. The sick woman shook her head at this. There was something else she wished to say. “You mustn’t let the children stay with Richard.”

Charlotte fervently promised not to. At the same time she was quite surprised. Marie Louise, then, did not worship her husband so blindly as she had supposed. She saw that he was a derelict, and that the children should be removed from his influence.

Then the sister said, as it were in confidence: “I am afraid of love. I knew what Richard was, but love compelled me to marry him. I hate love!”

Charlotte knew that Marie Louise had said that only to comfort her; she wanted her to understand that even the strongest love could mislead one and make one commit terrible mistakes. It was best to be guided by one’s reason.

She was about to reply that, for her part, she would be in love with love to the last moment of her life, and never be wroth with it, no matter how much suffering it brought her, when the sister was seized with a paroxysm of coughing. As soon as it had passed, Charlotte made haste to prepare the sister’s bed and help her into it.

That evening Charlotte attended to all the housewife’s duties: she prepared the children’s supper, kept them company during the meal, and also put them to bed. While thus handling kitchen utensils and crockery, wearing apparel and bedding, she was shocked to find how chipped and cracked and worn everything was. Such a lack of the most essential household furnishings! How careless and incompetent the servant girl had been! How patched and threadbare the children’s clothes were! How badly tables and chairs had been used! Here a back-rest was missing, there a leg gone.

There were scalding tears behind Charlotte’s eyelids, but they were not allowed to fall. Her heart ached for the sister who had endured such poverty with never a murmur or an appeal for aid.

Every little while, in the midst of her work, Charlotte would run in to see Marie Louise, who was now resting comfortably and seemed to enjoy being cared for.

“Now you shall hear something pleasant,” said Charlotte. “You’ll not have to wear yourself out like this any more. To-morrow I shall send you a good maid, and you can lie abed and play lazy until you’re quite well.”

The sick woman smiled wistfully, as if pleased at the prospect, but there was something, apparently, that weighed on her mind.

“All this comes too late,” thought Charlotte. “She knows that she is dying.”

When, in a few moments, Charlotte again stood by the sick bed, she talked of sending the sister to a health resort, where she could have proper care and attention. “You know that I shall have abundant means and that you can depend on me.”

It went against her to speak, in that way, of Schagerström’s wealth. But the sister liked it. The thought that Charlotte would be well-to-do was the best medicine for her own ills.

She drew Charlotte’s hands to her bosom and caressed them in thanks; still she did not appear to be wholly at ease.

Charlotte wondered what it was that troubled her. She had a faint suspicion, but would not entertain it. Did Marie Louise also wish to plead for her husband? She who lay there worn out, blotted out, and sick unto death!

When Charlotte had tucked all the children into their beds, she went again to the sister’s room. “I think I’d better go now,” she said. “But I’ll drop in at the night nurse’s house and ask her to stay with you to-night. In the morning, early, I’ll be here again.”

“I shall not need you to-morrow,” said the sick woman, patting the sister’s hand affectionately; “but come again on Monday.”

Charlotte understood that Marie Louise expected her husband, who that evening was out on a professional call, to be at home over Sunday, and probably did not wish him and the sister to meet.

The sick woman still clung to her hand. Charlotte knew there was something else she wanted to ask of her. She bent down and brushed back a stray lock from the sister’s forehead. As she did so, it seemed to her that she had touched death itself. In the sudden rush of feeling that this was perhaps the last time she would see her brave, loyal sister, she again met her unspoken wish.

“I promise you that Schagerström and I will take care of the Doctor.”

Oh, the look of joy that lighted up the face of the sick woman! She pressed Charlotte’s hand to her lips, and then sank back upon her pillow—happy and content. Her eyes closed, and in a little while she was sleeping peacefully.

“I knew it!” Charlotte said to herself. “It was of him she was thinking all the time. I knew that she could not hate love.”

* * *

It was after ten o’clock when Charlotte returned from her sister’s. She was about to open the back gate when she ran into the housemaid and the kitchen girl who had just come from a Pietist prayer-meeting at Holma.

The meeting, they said, had been held in an old smithy. Dr. Ekenstedt had spoken, and the place had been overcrowded. People had come, not only from the foundries and the church town, but from all parts of the parish.

Charlotte wanted to ask them whether Karl Arthur had been eloquent as usual, but the maids were so eager to relate what they had heard that she could not get a word in.

“Pastor Ekenstedt talked almost the whole evening about Fröken Charlotte,” said the housemaid. “He told how he and everyone else had done Fröken a great wrong. Fröken had not been false and crafty, and he wanted the whole community to know it.”

“And he told what Fröken had said and what he had said that time when you had the falling out,” the kitchen girl reported. “He wanted us to know how it had all come about. But I didn’t think it was very nice of him. A couple of boys who sat in front of me laughed till I thought they’d split their sides.”

“There were others, of course, who laughed and made fun,” vouchsafed the housemaid, “but they were the sort who haven’t any sense. All the rest thought it was lovely. And last the pastor said that we should all unite in prayer for Fröken Charlotte; for Fröken was going to set out on a perilous journey; Fröken was going to marry a rich man. And then he reminded us of Jesus’ words about it being so hard for the rich to get into heaven. . . . But where is Fröken?”

Charlotte had slipped away without a word. She ran to the house like one pursued—through the hall, up the stairs, and into her room. She did not stop to make a light, but tore off her clothes and got into bed. There she lay as if paralyzed, staring into the darkness.

“Now it is over,” she muttered. “Karl Arthur has killed my love.”

He had not succeeded before. Though he had wounded her love; despised it; insulted it; slandered it, yet it had lived on. But now it was dead.

She asked herself why that which he had just done was more unbearable than all the rest. She could not say why, but knew that it was.

Karl Arthur no doubt had meant well. In his desire to clear her name, he must have followed the dictates of his conscience; but all the same he had given her love its death blow.

She felt so pitifully poor! Think of having no one to dream of! No one to long for! When she read a beautiful story, the hero would no more assume *his* form and features. When she listened to impassioned music, aglow with the fervour of love, it would find no response in her heart. Would she ever again see any beauty in flowers or birds or children now that her love was dead?

The marriage state she was to enter lay before her like some great desert waste. If only love were with her still, she would have something in her heart. But now she must dwell in a strange place, desolation within and without.

She thought of the Baroness, and knew now what had kindled her wrath, and why she had looked so stern and resentful; she, too, lay thinking that Karl Arthur had killed her love.

Charlotte's thoughts also turned to Schagerström. What had the Baroness seen in him that made her wish he were her son? She had not said it merely to pay him an empty compliment; she meant every word.

Charlotte did not have to ponder long to understand what the Baroness had seen in him; she had discovered that Schagerström could love. That was something Karl Arthur could not do; he could not love in the right way.

She smiled, a bit dubious. Could Schagerström love in a better way than Karl Arthur? At all events, he had shown a lack of consideration in proposing to her, and he had been rather high-handed about the banns. But the Baroness was more intuitive than most people; she knew that Schagerström would never kill the love in one who loved him.

“It is such a dreadful thing to kill love!” sighed Charlotte.

Now she began to question whether Karl Arthur had done it of his own volition. He who for five years had been her fiancé must have known that nothing would wound her so deeply as his talking to a motley crowd about her and her love, and thereby making her a butt for ridicule and impertinent familiarities. Or, was it perhaps Thea Sundler who persuaded him in order to be done with Charlotte forever? Had the woman thought it was not enough with getting her married and out of Karl Arthur's way, that she must also offer her this deadly insult?

It mattered little which one of the two was to blame; at that moment Charlotte detested them both equally.

She lay for a while in an impotent rage. Now and then a tear trickled down her cheek on to the pillow.

In Charlotte's veins flowed the blood of Swedish peers, and in her soul lived the true Swedish will; the noble, proud will that remains undaunted in defeat and springs up with unbroken zeal to new struggles.

Of a sudden, she sat bolt-upright in bed, clenched her fists, and brought them together with a resounding blow.

“One thing is certain,” she said: “They shall not have the satisfaction of seeing me unhappy in my marriage!”

With this good resolution firmly fixed in mind, she lay back on her pillow and went to sleep. Nor did she awake until the Dean's wife came in at eight o'clock on Sunday morning with a coffee-tray, bedecked with flowers, worthily to usher in the solemn day.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WEDDING DAY

AT THE appointed hour on Sunday Schagerström appeared at the deanery. The Ironmaster came in his big landau, horses and trappings spick and shining; coachman and footman in gala livery, each with a nosegay tucked in his waistcoat. The dashboard had been removed so that their white buckskin breeches and varnished leather boots, which came almost to the knee, were in full view. The master's splendour was as nothing to that of his servants, though he, too, was in festal attire, having donned for the occasion a white frilled shirt, a white waistcoat, and a well-fitting gray frock coat, in the buttonhole of which was a rose-bud. In short, all who saw his equipage must have thought to themselves, "Well, well, is rich Schagerström going off to be married?"

The Ironmaster was touched by the hearty welcome accorded him at the deanery. During the recent distressing weeks, the old place had presented a sombre and inhospitable aspect. It would be hard to explain in what way this had shown itself, but to a sensitive person the change was quite marked.

To-day, the white gate stood open, and also the front doors. The Venetian blinds at the front windows of the upper story, which for weeks had been drawn, were now up again, and the strong sunshine could pour in and fade the colours in carpets and upholstery as much as it would. But the change did not consist in this alone. The flowers, that day, looked especially bright, while the twitter of the birds sounded merrier than common.

It was not only the trim housemaid who stood on the porch; the master and mistress also were there to welcome the bridegroom. The old couple, waiving all ceremony, embraced him, kissed him on each cheek, patted him, and called him by his Christian name. In fact, they treated him as a son. Schagerström, who had passed the night in anxious concern to find the right way, experienced a relief as distinct as when a bad tooth suddenly stops aching.

He was immediately conducted to the Dean's private study, where the bride awaited him. She looked charming in a gown of light changeable silk. The dress, to be sure, was of a style not then in vogue. (Charlotte had nothing of her own suitable for the occasion and the Dean's wife had found this in an old chest in the attic.) The dress was short and quite low at the neck, and it was fashioned in a way that made the wearer look as if her waist line were somewhere up around the armpits. However, the style was admirably suited to Charlotte. She had not bothered to procure any bridal crown or wreath, but the Dean's wife had caught up her curls with a high tortoiseshell comb, so that the coiffure harmonized with the gown. Round the neck she had two or three rows of pearl beads with a pretty locket, and there were bracelets to match. Though these were things of no intrinsic value, they were becoming to the wearer, who looked as if she had stepped out of an old painting. As Schagerström bent down to kiss her hand, she said with a tremulous smile:

“Karl Arthur left for Karlstad a few moments ago, to make up with his mother.”

“No one but you, good Fröken, could have brought that about,” said Schagerström. For he understood that, by her consenting to marry him, she had induced young Ekenstedt to go home. What was back of it all, he did not know; but, to tell the truth, he was displeased with the whole proceeding. Naturally, he admired the young girl’s self-sacrifice and wished to see the Baroness and her son reconciled. All the same—well, to be more explicit, he wished the young lady were marrying him for his own sake and not on account of young Ekenstedt.

“It was the *Evil Influence* you wrote about,” said Charlotte. “The Evil Influence would not be satisfied with less than my marriage and removal from Korskyrka Deanery. And it had to be done at once. No respite was granted.”

Schagerström noted the expression “no respite,” and thought it meant that Charlotte suffered unspeakable qualms in having to give him her hand.

“My dear Fröken, I regret——”

“My name is Charlotte,” the girl announced, with a curtsy, “and I’m going to call you Henrik.”

Schagerström bowed in thanks for the concession.

“I’m going to call you Henrik,” Charlotte reiterated, her voice now trembling a little. “Your late wife, I understand, called you Gustaf. I shall let her keep that name for her very own. One must leave to the dead what is theirs.”

Schagerström was agreeably surprised. He judged from her remark that she no longer felt such aversion for him as she had shown when they met at Örebro. If humility and self-deprecation had not become second nature with him, he would have been highly elated.

Charlotte now asked him whether he would be satisfied to have the nuptial ceremony performed in the Dean’s office, where so many bridal couples in the course of time had been united. “The Dean’s wife would have liked us to be married in the grand salon, but to me it seems more solemn and churchlike down here.”

As a matter of fact, Charlotte, having wished to pass the whole morning in close communion with her two dear old friends and guardians, had not allowed the Fru Dean to waste the precious moments in sweeping and dusting the now long unused salon.

The young Ironmaster had no objection, of course, to the marriage taking place in the Dean’s office. The coachman and the footman from Stora Sjötorp, the deanery farmer-tenant, his wife and all the servitors on the place were called in to witness the solemn act. While the Dean was reading the Marriage Service, outside the open window bullfinches and sparrows chirped right lustily and merrily; it seemed as if they knew what was happening and wished to celebrate the event by singing their best wedding hymns.

When it was over, Schagerström stood there looking rather awkward, not knowing what he should do; but Charlotte turned to him immediately and offered him her lips. She actually made him feel giddy. He had expected tears, stony grief, supercilious arrogance, in fact, anything but this complaisant submissiveness.

He remarked to himself: "All who see us must think it was I who was forced into this marriage, and not she."

He couldn't account for it in any way, except that Charlotte found it more consistent with her pride to appear happy and content. "But how well she does it," he thought, slightly vexed, but with a certain feeling of admiration.

And later, when they sat down to the wedding breakfast, the preparation of which, according to the Dean's wife, had been left to chance and Providence, Schagerström tried to cast off his gray-weather mood. The host and hostess, understanding that he found his position somewhat embarrassing, did their utmost to liven him, and were fairly successful.

At all events, they made him loosen his tongue. He spoke of his foreign travels, of his efforts to advance the Swedish iron industry by introducing certain methods he had learned in England and Germany. He noticed that Charlotte listened with rapt attention. She sat with head thrust forward and eyes wide open, following his every word. But that, he thought, was only play-acting. "She's doing it for the sake of the old people. It isn't likely that she would be interested in things of this sort, of which she has no understanding. She wants the Fru and Herr Dean to think she's in love with me, that's all."

Anyway, this was the better and more pleasing hypothesis. It did him good to see how devoted his wife was to this grand old couple.

Toward the end of the meal gloom settled over the spirits of the four. The old Dean and his wife sat thinking that in a few moments Charlotte would be leaving them. Charlotte, the radiant being, with her strange freaks, her drolleries, her ready tongue, her impetuosity; Charlotte, of whom they had so often disapproved but in whom they had forgiven everything because of her lovableness—she would be gone from their home. How empty and uninteresting life would be without her!

"It's well," said the old lady, "that you're coming back to-morrow to pack your belongings!"

Schagerström understood that they were trying to take comfort in the thought that Charlotte would not be so far away but they could see her, now and then. At the same time, he observed how shrunken and bent they suddenly became, and how the lines in their faces deepened. They had no one now to keep old age away!

"We are so happy, child of my heart," said the Dean, "that you have a good husband and are going to a lovely home! But you know that we shall miss you—we shall miss you dreadfully!"

He was on the verge of tears. But, happily, his wife saved the situation by telling Schagerström what her husband once said he would do if he were fifty years younger and a bachelor. This made them all laugh, and dispelled the sadness.

When the landau drew up before the door and Charlotte went over to the Dean's wife to say good-bye, the old lady led her into the adjoining room and whispered to her:

"Keep an eye on your husband this day, my dear! There's something he contemplates doing. Be watchful!"

Charlotte promised to do her best.

“He looks very well to-day,” the old lady remarked. “Have you noticed it? Fine clothes are becoming to him.” She was surprised when Charlotte rejoined:

“I have never thought him bad-looking. There is something forceful about the man; he’s like Napoleon.”

“Well, I declare!” said the old lady. “That never occurred to me. But I’m glad you think so.”

When Charlotte came out on the porch, ready to depart, Schagerström noted that she had on the same bonnet and mantilla she had worn when he first saw her at church, and which he had then thought severely plain and unbecoming. Now he found them charming, and felt a sudden wild elation that this lovely young girl was his and was going home with him. While Charlotte was engaged in a leave-taking which he thought would never end, Schagerström stepped up to her, seized her in his strong arms, and lifted her into the carriage.

“See there! see there! That’s as it should be,” the deanery folk shouted after him as the carriage swung round the circular flower-bordered drive, and out through the gate.

* * *

It need hardly be said that the young Ironmaster immediately regretted his bold act. It was wrong to frighten Charlotte. If he behaved in that manner, she would think he regarded their union as something more than a sham marriage and would claim the rights of a husband.

Charlotte really looked a trifle uneasy. She had moved over into the corner of the carriage, as far away from him as she could get; but before they came to the church town she again sat close beside him, chatting and smiling.

It was self-evident that she would maintain her pleasant mien while they drove along the village street; but it would be a different matter, thought Schagerström, when once they were out on the lonely country road.

However, Charlotte continued to talk in her easy, animated way throughout the whole long drive. Her topics of conversation tended to show that she was taking her marriage seriously.

She began with his horses. For the first, she wanted to know something about the four drawing the landau. Where he had purchased them; how old they were; their names. Were they skittish and had they ever bolted with him? Then she asked him about the other horses at Stora Sjötorp. Were there, perchance, any riding horses there, any well broken-in mounts? And saddles? Had they really an English sidesaddle?

She gave a pitying thought to the poor deanery horses; they would be utterly ruined now that she was not there to exercise them.

At that, Schagerström could not resist making a thrust. “The other day I was told by a strange lady in a diligence how a certain Fröken mistreated her benefactor’s innocent beasts.”

“What!” cried Charlotte, aghast. Then, in a second, she knew to what he alluded, and broke into peals of laughter.

A good laugh is a wonderful thing. All at once the formal constraint was broken, and these newly wedded persons were like two old friends.

Charlotte went right on with her quizzing. What sort of works and contrivances had they at Stora Sjötorp? How many forges in the smithy? What were the names of the smiths, the smiths' wives and children? She seemed to have heard that he had also a sawmill. Ah! so there was a flour mill, too. How many stones in the mill, and what was the name of the miller?

It was a thorough examination. Schagerström became utterly befuddled from all this quizzing. To some of the questions he could give clear and correct answers, but he did not know how many sheep he had, nor was he certain as to the number of milch cows in the cow byre, or just how much milk they gave. "That is the overseer's affair," he said, laughing.

"You actually sound as if you didn't know anything," said Charlotte. "There must be a terrible lack of order at your home. It will mean a lot of work before things are as they should be."

The prospect, apparently, was not displeasing to her and Schagerström confessed that he had long wished for a regular domestic tyrant, just such a stern housewife as Fru Forsius.

He had said something about an overseer, so she wanted to know how many men ate at the family table. What constituted the household. How many maidservants there were; and how many menservants. Had he a housekeeper? Was she any good?

Nor did she forget to speak of the garden. On learning that there were both hothouse and vinery, her surprise was as great as when he had told her about the saddle horses.

Schagerström, indeed, did not find the time long. When the landau turned in on the forest road leading to his home, he thought that the twelve or thirteen English miles between the church town and Stora Sjötorp had been wonderfully short that day. Otherwise, he was careful not to entertain any illusions.

"I understand her quite well," he said to himself. "She is trying to make the best of a bad bargain, and talks to keep from thinking."

Meantime, they had had a busy day at Stora Sjötorp. The messenger from the deanery had come at about three o'clock on Saturday; but the Ironmaster had not said a word concerning his expectations until late in the evening, when it suddenly occurred to him that he must procure a wedding ring. Then one of the overseers was ordered to drive to the nearest city and to rouse the goldsmith from his sweetest slumber, if need be, in order to purchase a plain gold ring, and have the names engraved therein.

Happily, the overseer had notified as many as he could that a new mistress was coming to the Manor on the morrow. And, indeed, it was well he had! Else, how would the housekeeper have found time to air the grand suite, remove all the furniture coverings, and clear away the dust? Or how would the head gardener have managed to get all the walks raked and all the flower beds weeded? However else would they have had time to clean livery, polish boots and harness and even the landau itself? The Ironmaster had wandered about in a daze, unable to attend to anything. Johansson the

footman had been obliged to select what he thought was the proper raiment for a bridegroom.

Fortunately, there were those on the estate who knew how to receive a young Fru. Both the housekeeper and the head gardener had been at Stora Sjötorp from the time Doomsman Oldencrona's lady had ruled there, and knew what the honour of the house demanded.

The housekeeper, for appearance' sake, had asked the Ironmaster for instructions regarding the reception just before he set out on Sunday, and the head gardener had been equally punctilious. Any thought of a reception had not occurred to Schagerström, but if Fru Sällberg wished to prepare a little dinner of welcome and the gardener could manage to put up a gate of honour, it would be quite agreeable to him.

These capable servitors, having thus obtained a free hand, had only to await the master's departure in order to set about preparations for an almost royal welcome.

"Bear in mind, Fru Sällberg," said the gardener, "that she is a lady of quality and knows what is customary on a large estate like this."

"But she comes only from a parsonage," the housekeeper reminded him, "so I don't think she knows anything; but that's no reason why others shouldn't show that they've some wit."

"Oh, don't be so cocksure about that!" the gardener retorted. "I have seen her at church, and, indeed, she does not look like any ordinary parsonage mamselle. You should have seen how she carried herself! She reminded me of her venerable Grace of Stora Sjötorp. My heart warmed to her."

"Let be as it may with her aristocracy," said the housekeeper, "I'm glad we're to have a young Fru in the house. Now there'll be balls and parties here again, and one can show what one can do. It will be quite different from preparing meals, day after day, for a few menfolk, who bolt their food."

"Just so you don't have too much of a good thing!" laughed the gardener. "One who has lived with Fru Forsius for so many years knows how to manage a house."

With that he rushed out. There was no time to waste in talk, if four triumphal arches were to be erected and the entrance decorated in monograms of floral design.

Nor could the gardener have carried out so ambitious a programme but for his many zealous helpers. One must consider that all on the estate—the foundry workers, the tenantry, the foresters, the servants—had been fired with enthusiasm. They were to have a Fru again at the big manor house; someone to whom they could go with their troubles and ailments. A mistress meant so much more than a master. She stayed at home, and to her they could talk of the children and the cow. That she would be there that very day seemed almost too good to be true.

A couple of boys had carried the news to the tenantry, and on every croft and in every house the people put on their best and went up to the Manor to catch a glimpse of the bride. All and sundry, the moment they appeared, were set to work. The gates of honour were raised; old flags and standards that had done service under former owners were hoisted all along the sides of the road. A pair of small cannon had been dragged

forth from somewhere, and mounted. It was a bustle and a rush of which one could scarcely form a conception.

But when the bride and groom drove in on Stora Sjötorp ground at about six o'clock, everything was in order.

At the first gate of honour, out in the woods, they were met by all the smiths from the foundries, who stood on guard with their sledge hammers held against the shoulder. By the second gate, at the edge of the wood, stood the farm workers, saluting with their spades. At the third gate, which marked the entrance to the avenue, they were greeted with huzzahs from the millers and the sawyers, while at the fourth gate, which led to the house grounds, the head gardener, with all his workmen about him, presented a gorgeous bouquet to the bride. And last, up at the house itself, the foundry manager, the overseers, the clerks, the housekeeper, and the maidservants stood bowing and curtsying.

However, it cannot be truthfully said that the people observed such perfect order as has here been described. They were all in high spirits; they shrieked and hurraed at the top of their lungs, even after the carriage had passed through the gate where they stood guard. Besides, the children ran alongside the carriage in a far from mannerly way, and the cannon salutes went off at the most unexpected moments.

But, then, it was all so delightfully festive. Had the sainted Fru Oldencrona looked down from her heaven she would have been pleased to see that Stora Sjötorp and her old gardener had done themselves honour.

Schagerström, of course, had not expected this big demonstration, and felt rather indignant at his employees for taking such liberties. But, luckily, his displeasure vanished as he looked at Charlotte.

Her lips were smiling, at the same time tears glistened in her eyes, and her hands were clasped.

“How beautiful!” she whispered. “How beautiful!”

All this: the gates of honour, the flowers, the flags, the cheers, the friendly smiles, the salutes from the small swivel-guns—all this was for her, to wish her welcome to the place. She who for weeks had been an object of scorn; she from whom everyone had turned away; she whose slightest movement had been followed with suspicion and odium; she who had hardly dared venture outside the door lest she meet with insult, she was honoured now beyond deserts or merit. Ah! she was touched; she was grateful.

Here there were no lampoons, no bouquets of thorns and thistles, no ribald laughter; here she was welcomed with joy.

She put out her arms to the people. She loved the place from the first moment, and everyone on it. It was as if she had come to a new world. A happy world. Here she wished to live and die.

* * *

What happiness for a man to lead his young bride into a beautiful home! To hear her exclamations of delight as they go from room to room; to run ahead a step or two

and throw open the doors to the adjoining one, then say: "This one, I think, is not half bad." And to see her flit about like a butterfly, now striking a few notes on the piano; now darting over to a painting; now casting a glance in a mirror to see whether the glass reflects a presentable image of herself; now flying to a window to look at a wonderful view.

But fancy his dismay when in the midst of it all she suddenly bursts into tears! With what anxious solicitude he asks her to tell him what troubles her, and how heartily he offers to alleviate her distress.

How glad he is to learn that it is nothing else than that she has a dear sister who lies ill in bare, ugly quarters while she herself, quite undeservedly, is permitted to enjoy all this beauty and grandeur. How pleased and proud he is to assure her that she may give the sister whatever help she needs. If she so wished, that very evening . . .

"No, not to-night. It will be time enough to-morrow."

Now that anxiety is over. She forgets it entirely, and the house inspection is resumed.

"This," she says, "is such a comfortable chair, and over there by the window is a suitable place for a sewing table."

Aye, to be sure. He thinks to himself, what a charming picture she will make seated at the sewing table. Then he remembers something he had almost forgotten: This was not a real marriage. All this was merely a play, though at moments it seemed as if she were taking it seriously. It was hard to tell just where he stood with her.

Anyhow, there was one comfort: He could let the play go on a few hours more, enjoy it as she was enjoying it, hide his anguish deep in his heart, and live in the happiness of the moment.

And thus, with the same delight, he continues to show her about until dinner is announced.

Oh, the wonder of it! To offer her his arm and lead her in to dinner! To seat her at a table beautifully laid with rare old china, glittering glass, and shining silver! To sit down with her to a royal feast of eight courses, with wine that glowed in the bottles like liquid jewels; with food that melted on the tongue so that one was scarcely conscious of eating!

Then the joy of having by your side a young woman who is everything you love most; who is clever and unaffected; who can hold her own; who fairly bubbles with mischief; who can laugh and cry in the same breath, and who at every moment reveals some new and charming trait.

And perhaps, too, it is a fortunate thing to be snatched away from it all just as one is about to lose one's head. For now the gardener, who that day is master of ceremonies at Stora Sjötorp, has come to announce that all is in order for the dance at the loft, but that no one will start dancing till the master and mistress appear. At a wedding, the bride and groom, of course, must open the ball.

What a delightful way to celebrate a wedding! Not among social equals, who perhaps would be envious and critical, but among these admiring, devoted servitors who regard you as something almost divine. For form's sake, the bridegroom dances

just one round with the bride on the slippery loft floor, then retires to watch her whirl about with smiths and millers, with old men and young boys—always with the same good humour. How wonderful to sit there recalling old tales and legends of elves and fairies who join in the dance with mortals, and carry away handsome youths to the woods with them. For, as she moves among the toil-worn people, she does not seem to be made of common earthly clay but of some finer, better substance.

Aye, and to sit there watching the moments fly till one sees that the time is at hand, that the wedding day is over, and one must face again the old empty life, the old loneliness!

* * *

As for Charlotte, her ears had been ringing the whole time with the warning: “Keep an eye on your husband this day, my dear! There’s something he contemplates doing. Be watchful!”

She noted his sudden changes of mood from gay to grave, and grave to gay, and always, before beginning a dance, she looked to see whether he was still in the loft, and the instant a partner left her, she ran over to her husband and sat down by him.

Charlotte being the sort who had her eyes about her, had observed when crossing the stable yard on her way to the loft that the small carriage Schagerström used on his long journeys had been drawn out of the coach house. That had aroused her suspicion and made her the more watchful. While dancing with the coachman she made a slight attempt to find out what was doing.

“I hope we are not dancing too long,” she said. “At what time is the Ironmaster leaving?”

“The time has not been fixed yet, your ladyship. But I have the carriage outside and the horses harnessed. In half-a-jiffy, I can be ready to go.”

Ah, now she knew what was in the air! But, as her husband was still sitting in the loft, calmly talking with some of his tenants, she thought it best to say nothing.

“Evidently, he had planned to leave to-night; but perhaps he has changed his mind, since he sees that I’m not so dangerous as he fancied.”

A little later, just as she had finished a long polka, she suddenly missed him. Darkness had come, and the big loft, illumined only by a couple of lanterns, was now quite dim, yet she knew at once that he was not there. She looked about anxiously for the coachman and the groom; they, too, seemed to have disappeared.

She quickly threw her mantilla about her, joined a group of young people, who stood in the wide doorway of the loft cooling themselves after the dance, said a few words to them, then slipped out, unobserved.

Stranger that she was on the place, she did not know which way to turn to get to the house; but seeing directly ahead the faint gleam from a lantern, she hastened in that direction. Coming nearer, she saw that the lantern stood on the ground outside the stable. The coachman had already led out the horses, and was putting them in the shafts.

Charlotte stole up to the carriage without making her presence known, thinking to open the door as soon as the coachman's back was turned, and hop in. Then, when the carriage pulled up at the house and Schagerström came out to take his place, she would tell him what she thought of his attempting to run away. "Why doesn't he tell me what's on his mind?" she wondered. "He's like a bashful boy."

But before she could put her plan into effect the coachman was ready; he hung the reins over the guard, drew on his driving coat and was about to step up on to the box, when he happened to remember the lantern. He said a quieting "Whoa, there, Peter and Paul" to the horses, then blew out the light, and put the lantern in the stable.

He was quick about it, too, but someone not far away was quicker. He had just shut the barn door, when he heard the crack of a whip and a sharp command. The horses were off and out through the gate—which he had taken the precaution to open—and down the avenue. The vehicle disappeared in the night darkness, but he heard the rumble of wheels and the clop, clop of the horses' hoofs.

If ever a coachman ran faster than his horses to get to the house and notify the master that some accursed rascal of a boy had jumped into the driver's seat and driven off under his very nose, it was Coachman Lundman of Stora Sjötorp!

He found Schagerström in the entrance hall in earnest conversation with the housekeeper, who was telling him that the young Fru had disappeared. "Master bade me tell her ladyship he hadn't time to stay longer at the loft and that she was to go on dancing as long as she liked, and when I went to speak to her ladyship——"

The coachman could not wait to let her finish; he had more important news. "Ironmaster!" he broke in.

Schagerström turned to him and said: "What's the trouble, Lundman? You look as if someone had stolen your horses."

"That's exactly what somebody has done, Ironmaster." Then he told just when and how it happened. "But it wasn't the fault of the horses," he added. "They never would have gone off without me if some limb of Satan hadn't sneaked up on the box! If I only knew who had dared——"

He stopped short. The master in the presence of the coachman, the footman, and the housekeeper, had flung himself down in a chair and was guffawing at their dismay.

"So you don't know who has stolen my horses?" he chuckled.

The three servitors stared.

"We must catch the thief," said Schagerström when he was through laughing. "Lundman, make haste to saddle three horses! Johansson, you go along and help him! Fru Sällberg, for certainty's sake, you'd better run upstairs and see whether her ladyship is there."

The housekeeper vanished, but reappeared in a moment with the information that the gracious Fru was not upstairs.

"Lord of Mercy!" she exclaimed. "I hope nothing dreadful has happened."

"That depends on how one takes it, Fru Sällberg. Up to this we've had to worry along by ourselves here at Stora Sjötorp, but now we have someone to rule over us."

“Yes; and for that we ought to be thankful, Ironmaster.”

At which Schagerström, rich Schagerström, patted the old cook on her fat shoulders and danced her round the hall shouting: “Fru Sällberg accepts her fate with proper resignation. May I be able to do the same.” Whereupon he rushed out to join the coachman and the footman in their hunt for the “thief.”

In a short while the chase was over and the runaway sat incarcerated in a corner of the carriage, with Schagerström at her side. Lundman had mounted the box, and was driving slowly back to the manor, while Johansson the footman led the saddle horses.

Charlotte, it seemed, had cleared about three miles of level road at a good rate of speed, and then there had been some stretches of steep uphill pulling. The animals, despite all her flourishes of the whip, had refused to take the hills at anything but a walking pace; so of course she was overtaken and had to surrender.

For a few minutes there was silence in the carriage. Suddenly, Charlotte asked:

“Well, how did it feel?”

“It was overwhelming!” said Schagerström. “Now I understand how a wife feels when her husband runs away from her.”

“That was what I meant to do,” Charlotte confessed.

Whereupon Schagerström felt a tight clutch at his shoulder.

“You are only putting on,” said Charlotte. “You’re laughing. You don’t believe I meant to run away.”

“My love, the one really gleeful moment I have had to-day,” Schagerström declared, “was when Lundman came and told me that you had stolen my horses.”

“And why so?” she asked in a monotone.

“Darling, I knew then that you would not let me go away.”

“I wasn’t thinking of you!” she burst forth. “The whole church town has been talking about me these last three weeks, and if you had gone away——”

“Yes, dear, I understand.” Schagerström laughed now from pure joy. But after a while he said quite seriously:

“My beloved, let us for once speak frankly to each other. Did you understand why I wished to leave to-night?”

“Yes, I understood,” Charlotte answered, in a firm voice.

“Then why did you prevent me?”

She was silent. He waited a long while for an answer; but, receiving none, he went on to say:

“When we get home you will find in your room a letter from me, in which I say that I shall not take advantage of the circumstances which have thrown you into my arms; that I wish you to be perfectly free; that you need not regard our union as anything but a mock marriage.”

Again he paused for an answer. None came.

“In that letter,” he continued, “I say, further, that as an earnest of my affection and to make amends for the suffering I have brought upon you, I propose to deed to you Stora Sjötorp. When a legal divorce has been effected, I shall be happy to know that you are living here, where everyone already loves you.”

Another long pause. Still no response from Charlotte.

“This little adventure in nowise affects what is stated in the letter. At first I misconstrued your motive, but I see now that you played me this trick so as not to be put to scorn again in the church town.”

Charlotte moved a trifle nearer. He felt her warm breath on his cheek as she whispered into his ear: “The stupidest ass on God’s green earth.”

“What?”

“Shall I say it again?”

He quickly put his arm around her and drew her to him. “Charlotte, you must speak! I’ve got to know what I’m to do.”

“Very well, then!” she said in a tone that was a bit sharp. “It is not a pleasant thing to relate, but perhaps you’ll be glad to hear that yesterday, at about this time, Karl Arthur killed my love.”

“Did he?”

“Yes, he put it to death. Probably he had grown tired of it. I almost believe he did it wilfully.”

“Darling!” said Schagerström. “Never mind about Karl Arthur. Speak of me! Even if your love for him is dead, it doesn’t necessarily follow——”

“No, of course not! Oh, dear! Why do you require such long explanations?”

“You know how stupid I am.”

“It is most extraordinary,” said Charlotte thoughtfully. “I don’t love you, yet I feel at ease, and safe, with you. I can talk to you about all sorts of things; I can ask anything of you; I can laugh and jest with you; I feel as tranquil and comfortable as though we had been married thirty years.”

“About like the old Dean and his wife,” Schagerström flung back at her.

“Yes, about the same. Perhaps you are not satisfied with that? But I think it a very good result for the first day. I like your sitting here beside me in the carriage. I like the way you followed me with your eyes when I danced. I like to sit at table with you, and I like being in your home. I am thankful to you for taking me away from all the unpleasantness. Stora Sjötorp is charming, but I shouldn’t care to live there a day if you were not there. I could never consent to your deserting me. Still, if that which I felt for Karl Arthur was love, then this is not love.”

“It may become——” Schagerström spoke quietly, but his voice, nevertheless, betrayed his emotion.

“Perhaps it may,” said Charlotte. “Do you know what? I don’t think I’d mind it if you kissed me.”

Schagerström's carriage was an excellent vehicle. It rolled along easily—no bumping, no shaking. The young Ironmaster could very comfortably avail himself of the permission.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Charlotte Löwensköld* by Selma Lagerlöf]