

THE CASTAWAY

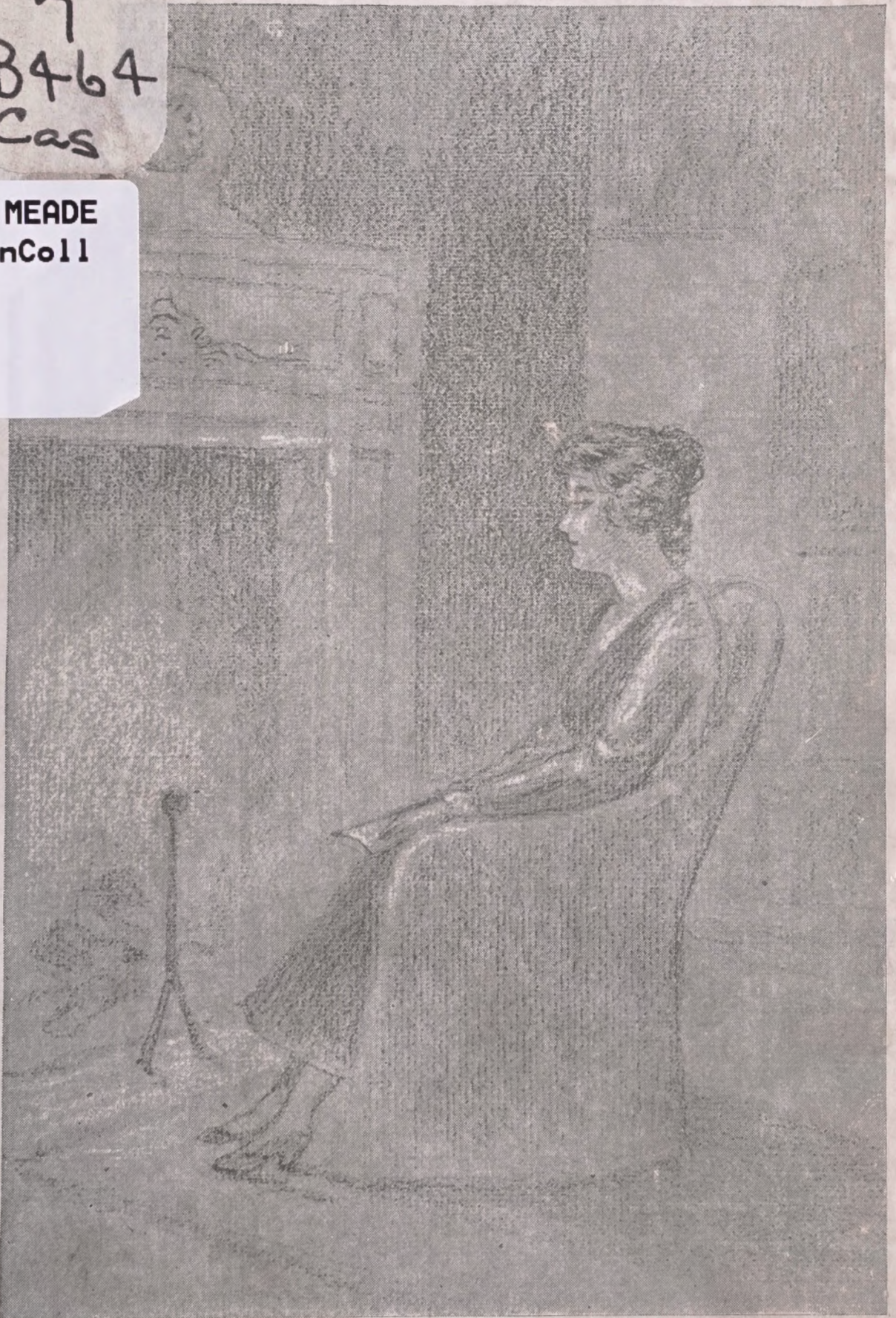
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I. A FIRESIDE ROMANCE.

THE last rays of the setting sun were lingering in the great hall of Cranecroft, discounting the blaze of light from the open fireplace. Before the fire sat Elsa Wing steeped in meditation upon her present station in life and speculation as to her future.

Elsa was a girl without other means of livelihood than those of her own earning. She had spent but a few months in the position of companion to Lady Crane, mistress of Cranecroft, who treated her with an air of condescension that stung her to the quick. Elsa's proud heart often rebelled, but being endowed with the power of self-control, she went about her duties without showing any signs of revolt, making herself, on the contrary, so agreeable to the old lady as to have already become her favorite.

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With the young woman, however, the task of serving had grown irksome, and she began to have well-defined plans for her own happiness in a little home of her own. It was upon these plans her mind was engaged as she sat staring fixedly into the fireplace, with no eye to the play of sunbeams as they etched her shadowy profile in the center of a square of golden mosaic on the wall.

Her eyes shifted to a letter in her lap which she had just perused. It was from Eric Branning. The few weeks he had spent on a visit in these parts before going away for the winter had sufficed to confirm an attachment between them. Not that she had any definite intentions in that direction, but merely from a natural desire to please and attract had she become the object and center of the young man's affections. Heretofore she had exercised her maidenly charms in a modest way only as a natural instinct, but henceforth she thought proper to engage the attention of

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some likely young admirer for a more serious purpose.

Although Eric had failed to elicit anything like a definite pledge of troth from Elsa at their parting, nevertheless he appeared to have taken a hesitant word from her and by sheer force of a willing fancy construed it little by little into a hard and fast promise. This according to the tone and trend of his ardent letter. Elsa chose to leave his faith undisturbed for the time being, relying on the future to point the way for her when the moment of final decision should come. Meanwhile she justified her course by the fact that no promise had been given and that a possible estrangement between them would involve no breach of faith on her part.

Eric was a sensible young man, who husbanded his resources and watched his opportunities. In Elsa's mind the prospect of a comfortable and care-free life by his side weighed heavily in his favor. He was a man of forceful will and a

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tenacity of purpose which gave her a sense of security. Quite different was her impression of Eric's brother, Helmer Branning, whose flighty and impetuous temperament inspired no confidence in his ability. He was given to building castles in the blue sky, a young knight errant who might prove a valiant fighter of windmills. Elsa Wing smiled at her own musings, and there came a tender look into her eyes at the very thought of Helmer,—that mere boy, who might never turn out to be any man at all, how could she give a serious thought to such as he?

At that very moment Helmer Branning entered the room. He was agreeably surprised to find her sitting alone at the fire-side. He brought with him a wave of cool, fresh air from the outside; in his eyebrows and his faint suggestion of a moustache there was hoarfrost which quickly changed to little beads of dew in the warmth of the room.

Elsa turned to view him as he stood tall

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and flushed and smiling before her, and the tender look in her eyes did not change. At this sign of encouragement he dropped suddenly down on the fur rug at her feet, conscious of taking liberties which she would not have tolerated in anyone else. When he leaned his head upon her lap, Elsa let that pass, mentally arguing this show of familiarity into a kittenish act of an overgrown boy.

"What have you there?" he inquired, as he happened to touch her pocket and heard the rustle of paper.

"A letter," she said, adding immediately by way of diverting his attention, "but how about those verses you promised me?"

"They are still unwritten, but you shall have them," he evaded. "Just now I am more interested in that letter — who is it from?"

"That isn't for Paul Pry to know. He had better get busy with those verses."

Elsa smiled and sought to toss it off with a jest. She did not deem it entirely

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judicious at this time to inform the younger brother of her correspondence with the elder.

"Miss Elsa Wing!" The young man pronounced the name with the mock formality of resentment.

"*Master* Helmer Branning," she replied in the same tone, her eyes glittering archly.

The suggestion of boyishness forced from Helmer a scoffing little laugh.

"I'll wager you've brought the verses," Elsa went on.

"Suppose I have — what then?"

"Then you'll give them to me at once."

"And you will tell me who the letter is from?"

"Well, that all depends on the quality of your verses," she parried.

He shook his head as much as to say that she was impossible, secretly admiring her meanwhile for her ready wit and her ability to give and take. With a show of hesitation he unbuttoned his coat and drew from an inside pocket a slip of paper.

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Elsa instantly snatched at it, but he guarded it as though it were a rare treasure and glanced up at her with a look that had something besides playfulness in it.

"Don't you dare to laugh at my verses!" he warned.

"That will depend on the vein the poet himself has struck," she replied.

He looked her squarely in the face with a sober manliness in his eyes which she had never before seen reflected there.

"Well," said he, solemnly, "if the lines are laughable, then laugh, but if you do, *I* shall never laugh again."

She smiled faintly at the exaggeration in his words, underrating the seriousness with which they were spoken. He handed her the slip of paper, intently watching her face while she was reading. When he saw astonishment, then emotion depicted there, he was satisfied. On the paper he had penned a little poem of passionate love, fresh and virile in its phrasing.

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"Why, you are a poet, Helmer," exclaimed Elsa with delight.

"If so, I well know who gave the inspiration."

Her eyes looked past him into the glowing brands, preferring not to meet his.

"I, too, know," she said. "No living mortal, but genius alone inspires the poet."

"Genius," he repeated. "Or Muse. Well, what is her name?"

"Don't ask her name. Just follow her guidance. If you pick a flower to pieces in order to analyze it, you deprive yourself of the enjoyment of its beauty and fragrance."

"You are right," he conceded vaguely, abandoning himself dreamily to the charm of the moment.

The sun had set, and the glow of the fire alone lit up the hall in the gloaming. Elsa realized the hazard of the situation, but knew not how to recall the young dreamer from his romantic mood.

Just then the door opened and Lady

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Crane entered. For a moment she eyed the confidential pair with a surprised look.

Elsa rose at once without any sign of embarrassment. Helmer, on the other hand, blushed like a young girl. Lady Crane shifted her glances from one to the other without saying a word, then took a seat and motioned to the others to sit down. Helmer did so instantly, but Elsa not until she had pushed a hassock under the old lady's feet, thrown a shawl over her shoulders, placed a cushion at her back, and performed sundry other little services for her comfort, chatting pleasantly and unconcernedly all the while.

Lady Crane, while appreciating these little attentions, did not permit them to affect her view of what her eyes had just witnessed.

The atmosphere of the room was surcharged.

In a little while Helmer found some pretext to leave. Then Lady Crane took Elsa to task.

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"Are you two engaged?" she queried abruptly.

"I engaged to Helmer! — Lady Crane, on what grounds do you base such a suspicion," Elsa responded with all the dignity at her command.

"You are in the habit, then, of granting your gentlemen callers the privilege of leaning fondly against you in that fashion?" the elder lady pursued her inquiry with acerbity.

"Not at all," Elsa replied airily, as though the charge were too extravagant to be taken in earnest. "But Helmer is still a boy, hardly to be classed with gentlemen as yet."

"Not so very boyish, either, to my way of thinking. He is past twenty-one," the old lady retorted.

"And I am twenty-six," Elsa quickly replied.

"Yes, I know very well that you are too old for him," Lady Crane went on in tart tones, "but that would not prevent him

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from becoming attached to you—to his own misfortune. I know Helmer Branning from his childhood and think too much of the young man to have an old girl set her traps for him without entering my protest. Furthermore, I do not tolerate love-making in my home. You will have to desist or leave.”

The old lady finished her lecture with a scathing look.

Elsa did not find a ready reply. Her cheeks were pale, but her eyes scintillated with injured pride. The insult was too grievous to be borne in silence, yet shrewd forethought stayed her tongue. A wordy outbreak at this moment, she knew, would cost her her place instantly, and probably more, for if Eric should learn the cause for the sudden loss of her position, his affections would doubtless cool. Helmer, on the contrary, would surely prove a gallant knight in her distress, but then—who would stake all on the chivalry of a fickle boy? Elsa crumpled Eric’s letter


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and Helmer's couplets in her pocket while drawing the comparison that disposed of her doubts.

"Forgive me, if I have offended in any way," she apologized with low voice and humble mien. "Lady Crane will have no further cause for dissatisfaction with me — that I promise."

And Lady Crane graciously forgave.

II. AT THE FORESTER'S LODGE.

RIC and Helmer Branning were joint owners of a farm, named Bergdale, which they had inherited from their father. This they managed well, Eric furnishing the brains and keeping the accounts, while Helmer provided chiefly man-power, often working harder than any day-laborer in field or forest.

“Just let me know what there is to do next, and I’ll do it,” was his usual remark to his brother whenever any work had been finished. He was a lover of nature and enjoyed to live his life out-of-doors. To him following the plow-tail or swinging the scythe was as honorable an occupation as any other. He scouted any and all protestations on the part of his friends

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that such menial duties were unbecoming to a gentleman.

That winter Helmer was managing the farm alone. Eric had conceived the idea of opening a shop in Stockholm for the sale of wild game. This Helmer looked upon as a needless catchpenny enterprise in view of their sound financial condition, but the elder brother shrugged his shoulders at such lack of business acumen and started for the capital at once in order to set himself up in business. All went well beyond his own expectations. This surprised no one, for from his boyhood Eric was known for his ability to drive a bargain and double his money.

"It's a fine thing after all to have such a business partner; one grows wealthy in a moderate way without a hand's turn," Helmer remarked one day to Elsa.

"Yes," she rejoined, "but is that the best way to make a man of you and teach you to rely on your own powers?"

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Helmer stretched his sinewy frame to its full height.

"I am something of a man now, don't you think?" he replied.

"No; just a big boy," she said laughing.

He was nettled by her disparaging opinion of his manhood; and it occupied his mind all next day while he was busy hauling cordwood from the forest.

So preoccupied was he with the thought of what Elsa had said that he came near driving straight past the forester's lodge without noticing Brita Reiner, his playmate from childhood, who stood on the doorstep, evidently expecting to catch his eye. In the last moment, however, he looked up and saw the girl.

"Hello, Brita," he called to her as he stopped the horse. "Haven't you a nice cool drink for the perspiring son of toil?" he added in a jocose vein.

Brita's face brightened. With a pleasant nod of her pretty head she vanished through the door. The next moment she

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reappeared with a glass of fruit-juice and water which she handed him, watching him smilingly as he drank.

"Tell me, Brita, am I just a big boy — a child?" he demanded after finishing the draft.

"A child!" she exclaimed in surprise.

She was a girl still under eighteen. To her the tall young fellow of twenty-one was a man indeed, and as likely a young gentleman as she knew of, to judge from the approving twinkle in her eyes.

Before the girl's gaze he began to feel his manly dignity restored.

"No, you don't think so," he added with satisfaction. "Well, neither do I. Did you ever see a child with muscles like these? Feel of them!" He knit his arm in the sleeve till it bulged with the mass of thong and sinew. Brita clutched the knotted upper arm with a woman's admiration of manly strength. He laughed.

"Don't be afraid. It will never harm *you*. Take a good grip."

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She gripped it with all her might.

"Pshaw — is that your best?" he challenged. "Well, you *are* a child, but never mind, you are a fine and dutiful lass to be taking care of the house and the whole family all by yourself."

"I take no credit for that. What else have I to do?" Brita made her protest with a modest smile that brought out a dimple in her left cheek.

"But isn't this a tedious life for you to lead?" he continued. "I never see you enjoying yourself."

"There is nothing tedious about work, and in a home there is lots to do," she replied cheerfully.

"There is a plenty, I have no doubt," he agreed. "I am sure there must be more to do indoors than out. These winter days a farm like Bergdale doesn't keep a man very busy. I am taking lots of time with this load of wood, you notice."

"But you have other work besides," the girl ventured with a hesitant look.

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"What, if I may ask?"

"You are writing verses on spare time."

"How do you know?"

Elsa showed me such a sweet little poem you had written."

"Did she show you that?" His face clouded as he spoke.

"And didn't she have your permission?" inquired Brita, her smile vanishing suddenly when she saw the effect of her words.

Helmer was visibly irritated. "Well," said he, "I didn't take a promise of her not to show it around, thinking that needless. I thought she would understand. Has she shown it to others, do you know?"

"I don't think so, for she let me copy it only on condition that no one else should see it," Brita explained reassuringly.

"You have a copy then?"

"Yes, can't I keep it?"

"Oh yes, if you like. — Good-bye," he said curtly, with lowering brows.

With a crack of the whip he was gone. Brita walked slowly back from the road

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and entered the cottage with a sinking sensation about the heart. Nothing serious had taken place, yet everything seemed so changed from a moment ago.

Shortly after noon Elsa Wing dropped in for a visit, bright and cheerful as was her habit.

"Now, Brita, bring out the goods and I'll help you make your new dress," she ordered with a gesture as if clearing for action.

The younger girl brought the goods, and Elsa was soon busy cutting out the pieces by pattern. She worked so fast that Brita grew slightly apprehensive, though she admired her deftness of hand.

"Aren't you afraid you are cutting that wrong?" she would ask.

"Oh no, don't worry," Elsa assured her, wielding the scissors with a steady hand.

As the two girls were proceeding with the basting, Brita suddenly broached the delicate subject that was on her mind.

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"Elsa, you ought not to have shown me those verses," she said.

"Oh, Helmer's, — and why not?"

"He didn't like it."

"You told him, did you?"

"Why, yes."

"You little goose!"

Both worked on in silence for a while. Then Brita spoke again.

"Elsa, do you like Helmer?" she asked abruptly.

"Why, of course."

"I mean — do you really-truly like him?" The question was put timidly and with a flush on the face of the speaker.

"Certainly. You couldn't like anybody just in fun, could you?"

Brita was flustered and at a loss how to express what was weighing on her mind. After stitching in silence for quite a while, she said with a burst of feeling:

"Oh, if you only knew how good Helmer is!"

"I have eyes, too," Elsa jested.



Ruth Gustafson

"You are a fine and dutiful lass to be taking care of the house and the whole family all by yourself." (Page 21.)

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Brita remained very serious.

"But you don't appreciate him fully. I am afraid you show your admiration more than you feel it."

There was an instant flash in Elsa's eyes. She was stung by the sharp point of a truth expressed by her girl friend with no intent to give pain. In self-defense she gave a thrust without calculating how painful a wound it might inflict.

"What makes you so anxious about Helmer? One might think you are in love with him."

She regretted her words as soon as they had passed her lips, for she saw the instant effect. Brita started as from a shock, then dropped her head like a wounded bird.

Elsa was not a heartless girl. She felt for her younger friend. Seized with a desire to ease the pain caused by such harsh dealing with a delicate subject, she began to make amends.

"Please, don't be offended at me for

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guessing your secret," she pleaded tenderly. "An attachment for a clean, sturdy, handsome young man like Helmer is nothing for a girl to be ashamed of. I have been dangerously near falling in love with him myself, I frankly admit, but then I saw the folly of it all, being so much older than he. But you are just the right age for him. You two would make a fine pair."

"Don't talk that way, please don't," said Brita, her face changing from pale to red. With a smile Elsa leaned over and kissed her, despite her resistance.

"You must look to your interest, girlie," she urged patronizingly, in an effort to smooth out Brita's ruffled temper, meanwhile giving her god advice. "You will win him, I am sure, just so you use tact. You have no idea how easily a young man is caught."

Brita sat silent. The knack of attracting suitors was not a part of her modest maidenly nature. She was more likely to

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set up a barrier against the other sex by her very fear of seeming forward.

"Let me tell you something," resumed Elsa in a confidential tone, "but you must not breathe it to a soul — just yet: I am to be engaged to Eric when he comes home in the spring."

"Oh, Elsa, I hadn't the slightest suspicion," exclaimed Brita in complete surprise, adding in the same breath, "Does Helmer know that?"


"No; but he will be informed when Eric comes."

"Why not before?"

"I don't want it known until then, and besides, why should Helmer know, in particular? Now, remember, this is absolutely confidential. The matter is not entirely settled, you understand, but there is no doubt of the outcome."

"Poor Helmer!" muttered Brita, forgetting her own feelings at the thought of the shock in store for the young man.

III. A BREACH BETWEEN BROTHERS.

 HE following spring Eric returned home. The first evening he and Helmer sat talking in the great hall at Bergdale. When the sun had set and twilight came on, Eric lit the lamp at once. Dreamy moods and romantic fancies were not for him, twilight musings least of all.

True to his commercial bent, he took up business matters first of all. After having rendered an account of the shop in Stockholm, almost tiring his brother out with endless details, he demanded to know everything that had been done at home during his absence. True, Helmer had written him an occasional letter relating to his management of the farm, but these being too perfunctory and void of detail

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to meet the requirements of the trained business man, Eric now had many questions to ask. When these matters finally had been disposed of the two brothers sat smoking their pipes in silence.

At length Eric spoke.

"There will soon be a mistress here at Bergdale — what do you say to that?"

"A mistress?" Helmer queried.

"Yes. I am betrothed and expect to be married before next fall," Eric explained.

"You don't say? To whom? A Stockholm girl, I take it."

"No, she lives near here. Guess."

Helmer did not care to guess. He shook his head with an impatient toss.

"Elsa Wing," announced Eric.

The brother sprang to his feet.

"That's not true," he protested vehemently.

Eric eyed him in surprise.

"You doubt it. — On what grounds?"

"Because she ——. Well, it is not possi-

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ble. There must be some misunderstanding."

"Nonsense, Helmer," retorted the elder brother. "I have her permission to announce our engagement shortly after my return home. It is down in black and white, in a letter penned by her own hand, and, furthermore, the promise was repeated and sealed with her own lips only a little while ago. So that is settled once for all — unless she proves untrue."

"Untrue," Helmer repeated, echo-like.

"What do you mean?" Eric demanded, rising to his feet, visibly irritated.

The younger brother stood before him crestfallen and so utterly undone that Eric, suspecting the cause, was seized with compassion. At this moment, however, Helmer resented sympathy.

"Don't mind what I have said," he pleaded in a voice that grew harsh in spite of his effort to speak calmly. "I am not quite myself to-night. All these business

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details have set my brains in a whirl. I must go out and cool off."

With these words he hastened from the room, lest he should again lose his self-control. Eric watched him go in the direction of the woods and disappear in the hazy gloom of the spring night.

The clock struck ten. It was too late, or Eric would have gone at once to Craneycroft to confront Elsa with the charge of having played him false. So Eric resumed his seat, relit his pipe, and plunged into the vortex of his own thoughts. After a puff or two, he forgot all about his pipe, and that friend of silent contemplation went out.

At sunrise, the dew sparkling in the grass, Brita Reiner crossed the yard at her home. Suddenly she heard the rustling of leaves and the cracking of dry twigs from the wood just across the road. She turned to look, and her eyes instantly lit up with interest. It was Helmer who

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strode briskly by. One glimpse of his moody countenance told her all.

“Eric has already told him,” she thought to herself, with a pang of mental agony.

She had the morning chores to do, then the preparation of breakfast. Contrary to her custom, she went about her duties absent-mindedly as in a dream. While busy out of doors that morning, she would halt at intervals and cast a long look in the direction where Helmer had just been seen.

The sound of footsteps again reached her ears, this time from the road. Eric Branning passed by without noticing her. He looked pale and agitated as he hastened on, turning in at the gates and hastening up the drive to the manor house. Shortly after, she saw him leave Cranecroft, and as he passed she noticed that his visage had not brightened. Again she paused to watch for Helmer's return, in the hope that he would come to her for comfort

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and sympathy, as was his wont in their childhood days.

But he did not come. He roamed aimlessly about the forest, and for once the charm of the woodlands in all their early morning freshness and glory was powerless to captivate the eyes and mind of the young nature-lover.

Helmer gave not the slightest heed to the course of his ramblings until he found himself unexpectedly in the park surrounding Cranecroft. His first impulse was to hasten off as from a plague-stricken region, yet some unseen power arrested his steps.

He saw a sight never witnessed by him before, — Elsa Wing in tears. She came toward him along the sandy walk. When she finally looked up and noticed his presence, she gave him a crushing look and turned back without a word.

He grew perplexed and began to ransack his memory for some word or act on his part that might have incurred Elsa's dis-

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pleasure, but found none. Then he hastened after her and, catching up with her, asked point-blank why she was crying. He was beside himself with anxiety at sight of her tears, and agreed to anything that would bring her comfort.

This she recognized, and her practical mind at once set about framing a plan. She gave him her hand, which he unintentionally pressed with such violence that the girl's face twitched with pain.

"Helmer," she said, addressing him by his Christian name for the first time, "I have been entirely frank with you, have I not?"

He nodded mutely.

"I have had my reasons for so doing," she pursued, withdrawing her hand from his strong grasp. "Having been for some time past secretly betrothed to Eric, I have looked upon you as a future brother. I realize now that it was thoughtless on my part to treat you as I have done. I did not surmise that others might misunder-

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stand my motives and interpret my conduct in a way to blacken my character to Eric. This has been done, and now Eric mistrusts my affections. This is the cause of my grief, and that cause must be removed, or I will be unhappy for life."

She finished with a sob. There was no longer bitterness in her tears, only profound sorrow; and for Helmer she had no anger, just a helpless appeal. She had not mistaken his chivalrous character.

"Don't cry, Elsa," he pleaded in a voice husky with tears but resolute withal. "I will clear you."

Tear-stained but hopeful, Elsa's eyes sought his determined face, and as her look bespoke her gratitude, she gave him her hand to press in confirmation of his pledge. Distrusting his power of self-control, Helmer dared not grasp it, but with a gallant bow hastened away.

On his way home he strained his mind to the utmost in planning his action, for this was to be the crucial test of his loy-

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alty, and what he did for the lady of his heart, the only thing she asked of him, had to be done well.

Slowly and with apparent calm he entered Eric's room.

"I am afraid you were puzzled at my peculiar behavior," he began, but Eric interrupted him.

"Not at all; I understand you perfectly," he snapped moodily. "You and I may well shake hands. We have both had our affections shamefully betrayed."

"Not both: I alone have been trifled with."

"Well, the fact that she ultimately chose me and rejected you proves her no better than a reverse decision would have made her out. She has played false in either case."

"No, Eric, she has not deceived me. My own imagination played me false. I was a fool. Is she to blame for that?"

Eric looked at his brother skeptically.

"You did not speak thus last night," he remarked.

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"I was not responsible then; to-day I know perfectly well what I am about."

"But your surprise was so genuine that you must have had absolute assurance of Elsa's affections."

"Our wishes often father our beliefs, and we are prone to flatter ourselves with groundless hopes," said Helmer, pained by the necessity for declaring himself a conceited simpleton; but his promise to Elsa he was determined to keep at all hazards.

Eric arose and stepped close to his brother. Looking him squarely into the eyes, he proceeded:

"Has there been nothing in her conduct toward you to support your belief that she was in love with you?"

"No," averred Helmer without wincing.

He knew full well that he was practicing deception upon his own brother, but what cared he now for right or wrong, just so Elsa was exonerated.

Eric's face brightened.

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"Are you sure?" he queried, still in doubt.

"I am," was Helmer's positive assurance.

"Then her friendship for you has been entirely innocent," Eric inferred. "She must have been totally ignorant of your feelings for her."

"Absolutely," avowed Helmer brazenly while struggling to conceal the smart as the white lie scorched his lips.

"Then I have wronged her grievously?" Eric pursued, with a roused sense of remorse.

"You have."

Eric stood for a moment in mute reflection, his brow clearing meanwhile. At length he extended his hand to Elmer and looked fixedly into his face.

"I thank you," said he. "You have no idea what a relief this gives me. For it is a dreadful thing to doubt the constancy of one you love."

"I believe you," Helmer assented.

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"No one but you could have so completely dispelled that mistrust," said Eric assuringly, "for on your word I know I can safely depend. You never *could* speak an untruth, Helmer," he concluded with emphasis.

The younger brother was compelled to drop his eyes at this unmerited praise, and remained silent for fear of betraying himself with a word and thus render worthless the tremendous sacrifice just made. For Elsa he had given, not his life, but what is more, his honor. The inner voice accused him, but he bade it be still.

One thing was now clear to Helmer: he must arrange to leave home at an early day. For how could he remain at Bergdale and see Elsa there as his brother's wife? The older brother instinctively understood this, and no explanations were needed when Helmer demanded his share of the property in ready money.

"Yes, you shall have the cash as soon as

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I can raise it," Eric assured him. "How do you intend to invest your capital?" he asked in his businesslike way.

"That matter I haven't given a thought, but never mind, I'll find some way," said Helmer carelessly. "First of all I am going to enjoy myself."

Eric shook his head.

"I hesitate to turn over the full amount in one sum," said he, "before you have matured some plan. I fear you might be tempted to squander it all and then find yourself down and out."

"Well, what of it? I won't bother anybody. I can go to work. Besides, doesn't the money belong to me?"

"Certainly, but ——"

"And am I not of legal age and responsible for myself?"

"Well, yes, as far as age goes."

"Haven't I a right, then, to do what I please with what belongs to me?" the younger man maintained.

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"Of course, but it is out of consideration for your welfare ——"

"Save yourself all needless worry. You look after your own affairs; I'll look after mine."

Helmer's harsh tone irritated Eric, but he kept himself well in hand and agreed to his brother's demands. His sympathy for the rejected rival was cooling rapidly. If a giddy young fellow loses his heart and falsely imagines himself loved in return, that gives him no warrant to take out his grudge on his associates, he argued.

"Well, when you've gone through it all, don't blame anyone else. Remember, I gave you fair warning." This was Eric's parting advice.

Helmer promised to remember.


Shortly after that, Helmer was paid his share of the farm, based on the legal valuation, together with a small sum by way of quitclaiming his joint ownership of the shop in Stockholm. This business being still in its inception and chiefly the result

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of Eric's planning, not of any substantial investment, the elder brother justly claimed it as mainly his own exclusive property.

Helmer, however, was content with the division, and had no thought of exacting more. His only desire was to get away from home to seek pleasure and oblivion in the great wide world.

IV. GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN.

ELMER was gone. In his native place little was heard of him from that time, and that little was not of the best.

“Can he have made an end of his money already?” said Eric to himself when one day he learnt that his brother was a member of the crew of a merchantman in the South American trade. After that there was no further news of the prodigal adventurer.

The heart of Brita Reiner was weighed down with sorrow. She was not given to romantic sentimentalism and had little leisure for day-dreaming or contemplation of her inner life. She was scarcely aware of her own grief, except when the occa-

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sional sight of Eric or the Bergdale manor struck a new pang to her aching heart. Every time she passed a favorite spot for their childhood games or one of the usual trysting places in later years, she keenly felt Helmer's absence and her own loss. After she heard the news that he had gone to sea, she had not a word from him. If perchance she was awakened at night by a storm, her first and only thought was of Helmer, and from her simple girlish heart would inevitably rise a whispered prayer for his safety.

She went about her daily round of duties as faithfully as before, but without interest or zest. Her devotion in church was frequently disturbed by heavy thoughts. Her lips would move in prayer, while her heart was far away. In her reading her mind would wander afar, only to return whenever some passage would recall her bereavement or some episode in her own experience. Her little brothers and sisters complained of her inattention, and her

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father missed the former sunshine in her presence.

The worst of it all was that Brita's mind was being gradually poisoned by bitterness. She who had been known for her kindness and fellow-feeling for all now began to harbor an antipathy to her intimate friend, Elsa Wing, and many a rebellious "why" arose against her and against God in the young girl's heart, once so confiding and trustful.

But one day a saving word reached Brita's heart. Lady Crane was a devout person in her own way, although very few so regarded her, arguing that piety did not go well together with her crabbed temper and her cold, harsh treatment of others. People forgot that the Lord's treasures may be contained even in the frailest of earthen vessels. Regardless of the depth of the old lady's piety, she became in this particular case the chosen instrument to carry out a little mission in God's service. She felt a certain responsibility for

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the souls of her subordinates and others with whom she came in contact, but she did not attempt to missionize in words of her own, presumably for the reason that she was as doubtful of her own fitness as were those about her. So she sowed the good seed by distributing tracts and other good literature. A small tract which she placed in the hand of Brita Reiner one day came as a godsend at the very moment when the girl was in great need of just such instruction as the leaflet had to give.

“WHO IS THE GOD OF YOUR HEART?”

This was the title of the tract. The question went straight to Brita's heart like the rays of a searchlight. At the first opportunity she sat down to read it. She flushed with interest as she read on:

“Thou shalt have no other gods before me. If you have another god than the true God, you are under judgment. That other god, the object of your adoration, might be ever so good, your love for him

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ever so natural and legitimate, but so long as God Almighty is not the God of your heart, you are living a life of sin and idolatry. But how can I compel my own heart? you ask. Whom I love, I love. How can I love another simply by command?

“You are right. This you cannot do of your own strength and will. But God conveys through His commandments the power to carry them out. When the Saviour says to the lame man, Arise and walk!—then the lame man instantly leaves his bed and walks, provided he has a desire to get well and harbors due respect for Christ’s commandment.

“When you receive God’s command to love Him above all things, and you realize how great a debt of love your heart owes Him, then turn to Him with a new-born desire to keep His law. Entrust yourself to His care in faith and hope, and rest assured that God’s love will win you over.

“The greater your debt, and the more

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feeble your power to pay that debt, the greater will be your love toward Him who cancels your debt and remits all your sins.

“Let the Holy Spirit guide you to Golgotha, there to meet your God in the person of Jesus Christ, His Son, who paid your debt in the supreme sacrifice of His blood. Such was His love for you before you gave Him even a thought. Can you resist the power of so great mercy? Can you steel your heart against such love?”

Brita read the little tract from beginning to end, then turned back and read it over again. Every word of it seemed to have been written as a personal message to her, to be applied to her particular case. From that day she began to pray to God that He would cleanse her from all idol-worship and be the one God of her heart. Her prayer was heard, and the answer came, not instantly, as she had hoped, but through a gradual transformation.

At first it appeared to her that however

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fervent her prayer, it availed nothing. God seemed farther away than ever before, while Helmer was in her mind every day and hour. She could not, would not relinquish the thought of him. At length she reached the point of despair, and was about to give up everything for lost. Still there was some hidden motive deep down in her heart that compelled her to persevere in prayer — the sense of that lack of peace with God that she sought.


During these spiritual trials Brita's sense of guilt grew, and she began to cry out of the depths of her agonized soul for divine help. When she reached that point, the answers to her prayers began to come. She was given to taste that the Lord is gracious. He took first place in her heart, and she had the blessed experience of being called out of darkness into God's marvelous light.

During her spiritual change of heart Brita's affection for Helmer Branning also underwent a change. Her grief for his

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absence and estrangement gave way to a deeper concern for his soul's welfare, for she knew that he was a stranger to God.

V. THE CHANCE MEETING.

RIC BRANNING and Elsa Wing had celebrated their marriage shortly after Helmer's departure and were now living in happiness and comfort at Bergdale.

Elsa proved an excellent manager of the household and in all things a sensible help-mate and wise councillor to her husband. Success was theirs, and Bergdale grew ever more prosperous. Eric was highly delighted with life and never tired of praising the qualities of the mistress of the manor, who had won the respect and admiration of the entire neighborhood. One thing alone displeased him: his young wife could not feel quite at home at Bergdale.

Whenever he was to make a business trip to Stockholm, he would intimate that

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she stay at home to supervise the management of affairs on the farm. But she would not listen to his suggestions. She would insist on accompanying him to the capital. His remonstrances she met with the inquiry whether their marriage was a compact for mere mutual usefulness, in which love and ideal companionship were to hold a subordinate place. Did it not occur to him that she, too, might need a change in the way of travel, rest, and recreation? She maintained with a woman's charming logic and convincing eloquence that she was the wife of his bosom, not only his team-mate on the farm. Each time he would yield with apparent good-nature to the force of her argument and raise no further objections.

So Elsa accompanied her husband to Stockholm and by various womanly wiles managed to prolong their stay far beyond the time limit fixed by her husband at the outset. She proved a shrewd business associate, too, although, to her way of

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thinking, that was a secondary matter in a marriage contract. It was part of her design to draw her husband's attention from his farm at Bergdale to his business in the capital; consequently she centered all her ingenuity on plans for the development of the latter. Eric was pleased with her excellent suggestions and convinced of their practicability, and he gradually found himself more attached to his shop in Stockholm than to his farm in the province. As a matter of course, a trip of supervision had to be made to the latter now and then, but when Eric's duties called him to Bergdale Elsa had no desire to accompany him.

Eric, however, continued to cherish a warm attachment for the farm where his boyhood days were spent. But his reasons were more a matter of calculation than of sentiment, after all. This Elsa realized, and she knew how to turn that circumstance to her advantage.

When she first broached her plan of sell-

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ing the farm, Eric would not listen to it. Yet she eventually brought him around to her view, knowing full well that for a busy man of affairs sentimental bonds would soon yield to the stress of economic interests and the lure of business opportunities. She gained her point.

They now had their permanent residence in the capital city, and Eric seldom if ever reverted to recollections of his childhood home.

In a short time Elsa acquired for them a large circle of acquaintances. Such were her social accomplishments that wherever she went she made a multitude of friends. Her attempt to draw her husband into the whirl of society, however, was not a complete success. Drawing him into the vortex of business had not proved nearly so difficult, for therein he had merely followed a natural inclination. For social accomplishments, on the other hand, Eric had little taste. Society ran altogether too much to leisure and luxury to meet

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with the approval of a man of his make-up and training. While somewhat displeased at his mercenary, matter-of-fact bent, his wife took this with good grace, inasmuch as it made for constantly increasing wealth, and this in turn lent added luster and increased popularity to her own person.

Lady Branning, as was now her social title, was a woman of vivacious temperament, and her keen, intelligent interest in matters that absorb the attention of the aggregate mind at once made her the soul and center of any circles in which she chose to move. But her charm of manner and girlish vivacity notwithstanding, she would sometimes betray to her friends, particularly those whom she honored by her confidences, a touch of melancholy that seemed to bespeak some secret sorrow. A sharp eye might detect a shade of nervousness in her exuberance, a restless anxiety in her grasping for ever widening spheres of interest, and then a relapse

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into gloomy moroseness in her serious moments.

The novelty of metropolitan life in the Swedish capital having worn off little by little, Elsa one day suggested a trip abroad. It was a mere feeler, and the response was negative. This did not discourage her. By and by she repeated the suggestion in the form of an elaborated plan showing how the trip might be made to promote business in the first place and afford pleasure and recreation as a mere side issue. Her womanly sagacity scored another triumph. Eric consented.

They traveled through several countries on the continent, visiting the capitals and other metropolitan cities. Elsa was all eyes and enthusiasm, and the interest her husband took in sight-seeing was chiefly inspired by her. Just prior to their return home she even gained his consent to a short stay at one of the fashionable watering places on the French coast.

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There Elsa hurled herself headlong into the social swim, and what with sailing, bathing, excursions, picnics, dinners, and balls, she enjoyed herself with a vengeance. Eric also took delight in the brief sejour, more so than his wife had looked for, particularly after meeting several prominent London merchants whose acquaintance he hoped to turn to good account.

Strolling one day up and down the beach, Eric and the Englishmen saw a crowd of half-tipsy sailors coming toward them, walking arm in arm and singing with raucous voices. Absorbed in conversation, Eric had paid little attention to the jolly tars, when a voice suddenly called out in Swedish:

“Ohoy there, Eric, you old landlubber, how are you?”

Eric Branning stopped short. Indeed! The tanned young seaman who had addressed him so familiarly was none other than his brother Helmer.

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In business life Eric had acquired self-possession and presence of mind for surprising or delicate situations. His first concern was not to hazard any loss of caste or standing with his new-found business friends through undue familiarity with a rough sailor lad, so he turned to them with a polite request to be excused for leaving them for a moment.

"That sailor is a fellow-countryman of mine whom I knew years ago. I must speak a word with him," he explained.

The two English gentlemen courteously bowed their consent and left with a puzzled glance back at the simple-looking fellow that claimed familiarity with this elegant Swedish gentleman.

Meanwhile Helmer Branning, in a less courteous way, had told his pals to move on, and they reeled down the beach screaming their ribald songs in the ears of the fashionable crowd.

Now the two brothers stood face to face.

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Many years had passed since they parted, yet their meeting was far from cordial.

"Aha — so I'm just a *countryman* of yours," Helmer opened up in a wrangling mood. "You'd rather steer clear of me, I see."

"Not at all, Helmer," Eric protested somewhat stiffly. "I am glad to have found you."

The fact that his brother chanced to overhear his remark to the two Londoners nettled Eric, as was evident from his tone.

"You don't look it," retorted Helmer derisively.

"Yes, I *am* glad to have found you," Eric maintained with no loss of dignity, "but it does *not* please me to find you in this condition," he added with emphasis.

"Oh, I'm all right, all right. Not so spick and span as you, mebbe, but this here rig is good enough for me, see!" Helmer rambled on.

"You are drunk."

"Drunk as a lord, sure I am, but as for

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that — this is just a fancy little jag, compared to some of the cargoes this old liner has carried in her day.”

“Helmer!” Eric spoke with utmost sternness. “Do better, and return home!”

“What business have I at home? Who’d meet me there but an older brother, who never did any wrong? I don’t belong in his class.”

Although roiled by his brother’s sarcasm, Eric preserved a calm exterior.

“Come with me, Helmer, and meet Elsa. She may be able to talk sense into that bull’s-head of yours.”

“No, thanks. I have nothing unsettled with your wife, Eric. And if there was a bone to pick between you and me, you’ve picked it,” Helmer declined, with a broad allusion. “I can keep mum, depend on it!”

As he spoke, Helmer glanced down the beach, where his comrades were about to launch the jolly-boat in which they had come ashore. Eric was worried. He felt ashamed to go back to his wife and tell her

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that he had met Helmer but failed to get any hold on him.

"Helmer, let them go without you. "Leave the ship, and be my guest until we can make other arrangements."

"I prefer hardtack to charity crusts. They might stick in my throat, I'm afraid. Besides I've hired with this crew, and you don't catch me deserting. My pals are waiting for me down there. So long!"

"At least give me an address where a letter will reach you," Eric insisted.

"My address is the sea."

"But where do you go from here?"

"The way the prow points."

"You have only short, bitter replies to my questions. Have you forgotten that we are brothers? How can I leave you thus — let you cast yourself adrift again, after having found you at last?"

"Never mind, I am used to drifting. That's my business mostly, and it suits me jolly well. — They're calling me — I've got to be off."

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Helmer held out his hand to Eric, who grasped it as though he meant to hold his brother back by force.

"If I let you go now, Helmer, how can I answer for it to all those at home who miss you and hope to see you return and settle down as an honest man instead of drifting as a human wreck?"

"A wreck!" ejaculated the ne'er-do-well. "You just tell the folks at home not to worry about Helmer Branning. Leave it to me. I'll take care of myself. Tell them, too, that you met me and did what you could to win me back, but found me bitter and mulish and unwilling to listen to reason. But don't try to explain what made me so, for you don't know. — Well, drunk and tough as I am, you still gave me your hand — that I'll never forget."

Helmer's voice wavered toward the last. Firmly pressing his brother's hand, he started on a run down the beach toward the boat landing, where his fellow tars were loudly venting their impatience. He

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had to make a long leap into the boat, which had already pushed from shore. With powerful strokes the sailors rowed out to their ship lying at anchor in the roadstead.

This was a stately three-master. Eric stood watching the boat until it reached the ship, and he could not but admire the vessel as her sails were slowly spread like the wings of a large bird, and she majestically moved out to sea.

Elsa had been out with a yachting party. Upon her return she was puzzled to know what had happened. Her husband was peculiarly distracted and reticent, without offering any explanation. He had resolved not to mention this encounter with Helmer, hoping thereby to escape criticism for his failure to win back the prodigal. But Elsa was unyielding in her entreaties to learn the cause of his disturbed state of mind. To put an end to her importunate questioning, he finally explained that

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he had been very forcibly reminded of his long lost brother.

“And I cannot get away from the suspicion that you did trifle with him, after all,” he added darkly. “It was unrequited love that drove him away to sea.”

Elsa grew pale. He had suddenly torn open the old wound that had almost healed over.

“Why should you revert to the past and bring up this old charge, knowing as you do that I was exonerated by Helmer himself?” she said in a tone of annoyance.

“True, he did, but ——” Eric hesitated. Elsa refrained from demanding further explanation, and the matter was dropped in the middle of the sentence. Unable to worm out of her husband the cause of this unexpected revival of an old suspicion, she desisted from further inquiry, meanwhile noticing an ever increasing coolness on his part. Though deeply pained, she gave no sign, but sought compensation for her husband’s frigid conduct among her warmer

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circle of friends. Completely absorbed by his mercantile affairs, Eric paid little attention to what his wife was doing.

VI. THE SAILORS' CHRISTMAS.



ON Christmas Eve Helmer found himself in an English port. Part of the crew of his ship had been given permission to go ashore, and he was among those on leave. They roamed about the streets in search of a jolly good time. At length they reached a resort that seemed to offer just that kind of pleasure which appealed to their basest appetites. The crowd filed in — all but Helmer, who stopped outside the door and held back a boy of fourteen, named Nils, the youngest member of the ship's crew.

The lad had formed an attachment for Helmer from the first, and followed him with somewhat of the trust and faithfulness of a dog. Nils, or Nissy, as he was nicknamed by captain and crew, was on his

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maiden voyage. This being his first visit in a foreign port, his face shone with pleasant anticipation as he stood, ruddy and clean and untainted, at the door of the den of vice.

"Say, Nissy, this is nothing for you," Helmer advised. "Better stay out."

Nissy looked at him with a long face.

"Where can I go, then?" he faltered.

"Go back to the ship."

The boy objected. On board he would feel dreadfully lonesome, especially on a night like this and in the absence of his best friend.

"Let him in, Hal," ordered one of the others, who came out to see what had become of the laggards. "It will make a man of him all the sooner," was his crude philosophy.

The lad's eyes brightened at this unexpected backing, but Helmer instantly blasted his hopes.

"I *will* not let the boy in," he said resolutely. — "Go back on board, Nissy!"

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"Why can't you let me go along?" whimpered the boy.

"Because this is no place for boys."

"But *you* can go in there."

"That's different. I'm a man. You are just a kid."

"What does that matter?"

"Oh, just because. Now, don't fuss, but do what I tell you to."

Without another word the little fellow turned and started off alone through the strange city. Never before in his young life had he felt so utterly lonesome. Dismay was written in his face. When Helmer saw this, his better nature got the upper hand.

"I am going with you," he said abruptly. "Come on, Nissy, we'll have some fun all by ourselves."

With that he took the boy by the arm and the two hurried away, the older comrade with the appearance of fleeing from a temptation to which he had been about to succumb.

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Nils was mightily relieved and his heart leaped for joy. Roaming about in a foreign city on Christmas Eve, far from home and kin, he asked for nothing better than the companionship of his protector and friend. He grew talkative and began to tell Helmer of his folks at home, how they were wont to celebrate Christmas, how he had longed to go to sea and how hard it was at first, when he was seasick and awkward and friendless. Now he had begun to find his place and get used to his duties on board, he said, and didn't Helmer, too, think he was getting on fine and doing pretty near a man's work, the lad demanded of his older companion. Thus he pattered on until it suddenly dawned upon him that Helmer was not saying a word.

"Are you missing the fun for my sake?" he asked. "Why, then, didn't you let me go in, too?"

"See here, Nissy, I'd rather miss that fun for your sake than see you in that place for my sake," said Helmer firmly.

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"But you are missing it a little bit, aren't you? If I'd known this, I'd 'ave stayed on board to-night. I'll go back, and you can go with the others."

"Not at all, my boy," said Helmer evasively. "It's mighty queer if we can't kick up some fun for just us two. You think of something!"

Nissy's mind worked with a full head of steam.

"Let's play we're celebrating Christmas Eve back home in Sweden," he proposed presently.

"That's a go," Helmer agreed. "First we'll drop into the nearest store and buy presents for each other."

Nissy was elated, but at the entrance to the first shop reached he grew serious.

"But if we do our buying together, there won't be any surprise," he remarked.

"That's so," Helmer admitted. "Well, you go in here, and I'll go in next door, then we'll meet outside."

Before long the two comrades came out,

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each carrying several parcels and wearing a mysterious look.

"Where'll we go, so we can hand out the presents and open the packages?" was Nissy's next care.

"That's a hard nut to crack, my boy. Oh, well, the curb will do well enough, or some stairway," suggested the older head.

They soon found a sheltered doorway where they sat down and prepared for their novel Christmas celebration. After a little while Helmer grew silent and showed signs of uneasiness. He felt drawn to his other comrades, and was angry with himself for permitting this young stripling to stand between him and the pleasures he had so keenly anticipated. With no regret for his act, he pondered on a way of getting rid of the boy without leaving him to the tender mercies of the city streets or sending him back to spend a lonesome and cheerless Christmas Eve on shipboard.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I've got it," he exclaimed. "What an

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idiot I was not to think of that before! We'll go to the Scandinavian Seaman's Home. There they're just now celebrating. How does that suit you?"

"Fine! Let's go right away," the lad chimed in, always ready for anything his friend proposed.

On the way to the refuge Nissy's ardor was cruelly smothered when Helmer indirectly intimated that he was taking him there only to leave him and rejoin his comrades.

"Now promise me that you step right up to the seamen's pastor and ask to be shown the way back to the ship when all is over," Helmer instructed him.

"Why don't you want to be there yourself? Don't you want to celebrate the real way?"

"Oh, I don't care much about it."

The boy walked along disheartened and silent.

"Can't you find the way?" he queried,

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anxiously, when Helmer stopped and looked doubtfully about.

"Well, I had some idea of where it was, but we'll have to ask our way, I see."

"Never mind. I'd just as lief go back to the harbor." Nissy tried to put assurance into his voice.

Helmer would not listen to that. He picked his way to the Scandinavian mission somehow, and when they arrived they could notice from the illuminated windows and the festive hum from within that the celebration of Christmas Eve in Swedish fashion was in full swing. Helmer stopped.

"Go on in," he told the boy.

Nissy looked up at him imploringly.

"Won't you come with me?" he pleaded. "Just for a little while. I feel so uneasy in a strange crowd. And maybe they won't let a boy in alone."

Helmer shrugged his broad shoulders uneasily, but yielded. He was determined,

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however, to slip out as soon as he had procured a good place for his protégé.

The supper was over and coffee was being served to everybody, friends and strangers alike. Down at the door the wife of the seaman's missionary was on the lookout. Seeing the sailor enter with the cabin-boy, she greeted both with great cordiality and pushed them gently through the crowd toward the serving-table. No one was expected to decline. As she conducted the two belated guests down the hall in person, there was no way for Helmer but to follow. Had it been the pastor, he might have nerved himself to a "No, thank you!" but to a lady he was unable to show such discourtesy. Concealing his chagrin, he politely accepted the proffered cup. She remained by their side, chatting pleasantly while they enjoyed the treat. Nils cast eager eyes on the resplendent Christmas tree, dressed with her own hands, and weighed down with decorations and gifts sent direct from the home country, as she explained.

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"I am so sorry you did not come a little earlier," she said, "so you could have been along from the start. Now the festival is almost over, but fortunately the distribution of presents is still to come."

This with a gentle smile for Nils, who responded with a happy, boyish grin and went on to tell of the little celebration Helmer and he had planned for themselves. The kind hostess was visibly touched, and she gave Helmer a look which bespoke more plainly than words her admiration for a young sailor who could devise such innocent enjoyment in a strange city full of vicious allurements. Feeling quite unworthy of her good opinion of him, Helmer chafed under the moral restraint of the pure woman's presence and wished himself far away. He was watching for an opportunity to slink out of the hall, but everything conspired against him. As soon as he was relieved of his coffee cup, the organ commenced to play. The hostess ushered Helmer and Nils to one of the

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front seats and took her place beside them. What could Helmer do but bow politely and sit down?

The song rang mightily through the hall, carried by a hundred and more strong men's voices. Then the mass of presents sent from Sweden were handed out to the throng of sailor men who were prevented from enjoying the yuletide with their near and dear ones at home. Not even now could Helmer find a plausible excuse for leaving. Resigned to his fate, he settled down with the idea of staying it out, consoling himself with the thought that all would soon be over.

He drew a number and received the small package to which it entitled him. A smile of disdain played about his lips as he removed the wrapper. The package was found to contain a so-called "sailor's housewife," a little cloth bag or wallet, with pockets, containing needles and thread, buttons, and the like. Oh well, the thing might come handy. Despite his ap-

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parent scorn for the outfit, he deigned to examine it with some degree of curiosity. In this sartorial repair kit, hidden in a bunch of patches of various color and texture, he finally discovered a slip of paper — a note from the donor of the bag. Deaf to the noise and bustle and bursts of merriment all around him, Helmer unfolded the slip and read:

"To my Unknown Friend:

Kindly accept this little gift from one who has a tender spot in her heart for the workers of the sea. Possibly you may have use for it. Many well-wishes are sewed into its fabric. Above all else, the giver hopes that the true God may become the God of your heart, provided He has not yet taken possession. If you are His, He is mighty to save and preserve you; if you are not, He may still find you, for He is the Lord of land and sea and His Spirit moves upon the face of the waters.

It would be a pleasure indeed to learn into whose hands my slight gift has fallen. Would you be so kind as to write and tell

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me your name and give some little account of your past life.

BRITA REINER,
Forester's Lodge, Cranecroft, Sweden.

"Helmer, are you very anxious to get away?" whispered Nissy in his ear.

"Why do you think so?" returned Helmer absent-mindedly.

"Because you look that way. They're all talking and laughing. You just sit here quiet and glum. Don't you like the present you got?"

"Sure I do — I'm more than satisfied," said Helmer.

"Look, what *I* got. Isn't that fine?" said Nissy, holding up some little knickknack.

Helmer pretended to admire the boy's Christmas gift, then showed Nissy his own after having carefully put away Brita Reiner's letter in his pocket. Nissy examined the "housewife" and made a little joke of his own about Helmer's unexpected *marriage*.

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The organ sounded again, and all the manly voices rang out, now more heartily than before, in the closing hymn. With a fervent prayer by the seaman's missionary pastor the festival came to an end.

"I'll take you back to the ship at any rate," said Helmer, as he and Nissy left the seamen's home.

"Are you sorry you came?" queried the boy.

"Oh no, I enjoyed myself fairly."

"I am glad you did," said Nissy with a sense of relief. "I'd hate to think you were disappointed. I had such a good time."

The seaman's home was near that part of the harbor where their ship was moored, and the two companions soon stepped aboard.

"Now you are free to go where you like. You are going right back, I suppose," said Nissy as they passed the gangway.

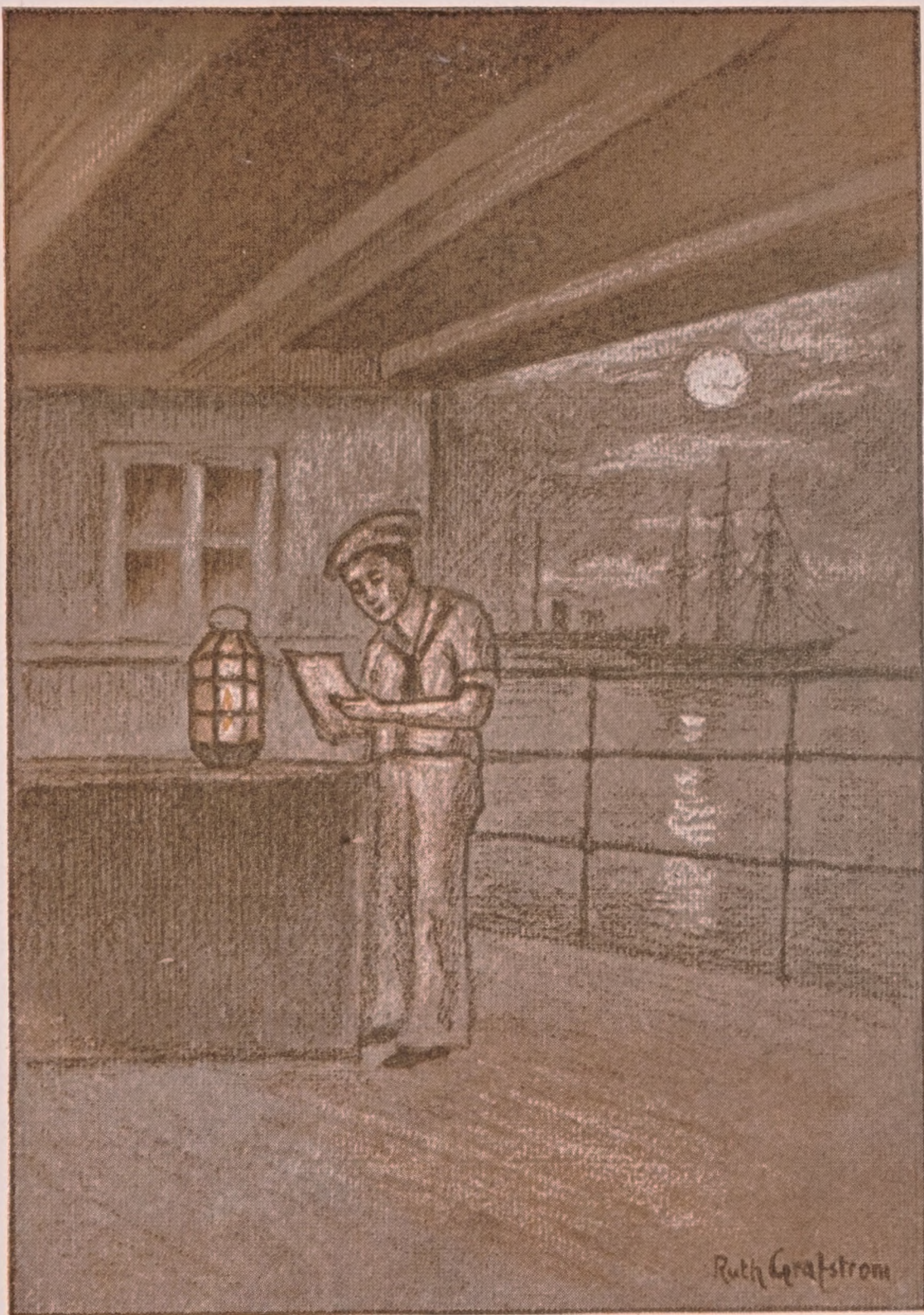
"No, not just yet," Helmer replied. "I'm going to stay on deck and do a little thinking all by myself."

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Nils took the plain hint and with a pleasant good-night went straight to the cabin where he was soon sound asleep in his bunk.

As soon as Helmer was alone he stepped close to a lantern and read Brita's letter a second time. He did not go back to his comrades on shore leave but walked the deck in deep meditation for hours that starlit Christmas night. Numberless vessels turned the harbor into a forest of masts, and through the spars and tackle the big stars looked down clear and bright on the wakeful wanderer.

The more Helmer thought of home and of Brita and her message, the stronger grew his impulse to reply. It were only right and proper that he should send a word of thanks and appreciation for what he had received. Going below, he at once took out pen and paper and sat down to write. His own clear, round style he sought to disguise into a crooked and sprawling hand. This is what he wrote:



Ruth Grafstrom

As soon as Helmer was alone he stepped close to a lantern and read Brita's letter a second time. (Page 80.)

THE SAILORS' CHRISTMAS

"Miss Brita Reiner:

I wish to thank you for the handy 'housewife' and the letter. You want to know who got your present. Well, I was the lucky fellow, all right. Then you want to know something about me. Well, there isn't much to tell, and there's nobody that cares much, either. I became a sailor because I didn't want to be anything else. I am not married but I have a little sweetheart. She has her moods and whims, but she is always pretty, even when she pouts. I like her best when she storms. Then she gives a fellow a hard tussle but it makes a real man of him. I suppose you wonder who this sweetheart is. Well, it's the Ocean.

Now I have told nearly all there is to say about myself. I would like very much to have Miss Brita tell me something about herself. The next port we make is Marseilles, and my name is,

Yours gratefully,

CHARLES STORM.

With no little satisfaction with his effort Helmer enclosed the letter and stamped it for mailing.

VII. THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.



HE first thing Helmer did when he reached the French port was to go to the post office and ask for mail. In his excitement he forgot the signature and gave his real name instead. The clerk at the window shook his head. There was no letter for Helmer Branning. His face twitched with disappointment as he turned to go. Just as he was about to leave, the recollection flashed through his mind that the expected letter was for Charles Storm, not for Helmer Branning. He returned to the window and, giving his fictitious name, received the longed for missive. In an out-of-the-way corner he opened the letter and read it at his leisure.

This second message from Brita brought tears to his eyes. She wrote in her artless

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

way of the things he already knew, yet nothing that he had ever read before had touched him so profoundly.

He saw the girl before his eyes like a living presence, her beaming eyes with the gentle, good-natured look in them, her pretty smile with the dimple in her left cheek, the tender, girlish form, all stood before him in lifelike reality. There had been balm of healing for him in her very being. Helmer had felt it as a boy when they played together and availed himself of that secret power. In his childish sorrows he had always sought comfort from little Brita, who knew just how to sympathize with him, though she said but little. Nevertheless, when he grew to young manhood, dauntless, care-free, unscathed, then it was not so much a sympathetic comrade he required as an object of his adoration, a lady-love, the winning of whom was worth the breaking of a knightly lance, if need be; for that reason Elsa Wing and not Brita Reiner had become the object of

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Helmer's romantic passion. Wounded in the first tilt in love's tournament, he had fled from home and become a knight errant of the sea in an effort to obliterate the past.

He had succeeded in part: Elsa's image was erased from the tablets of his heart, and the wound caused by her duplicity was now healed. Life had given him other battles to fight; and he had fought with something of the wild viking courage of his forefathers. Wounds he had often received, painful wounds, but to the most fatal of these he had scarcely given heed until now that he was again confronted with his little childhood friend. He felt the loss of much that Brita had admired in him. Even the vivid memory of her proved a balm of healing, though it caused his open wounds to smart bitterly.

On his next letter Helmer spent much more time. Anxious as he was to keep up the correspondence, the tender tone of Brita's missive warned him to take the greatest precaution not to frighten or es-

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trange her by the slightest trace of indiscreet familiarity or unmannerly boldness.

The exchange was kept up, Brita punctually sending a letter to every port designated and Helmer always replying by return mail. Her letters were no sermons, yet their purport was manifest: she sought to direct the sailor's eyes and mind godward.

Sometimes he had compunctions of conscience for writing her under an assumed name, while she signed her true name in implicit trustfulness. However, he dared not reveal his true self to her for fear the deception might cause her to break off the correspondence which had by now grown indispensable to him. Brita's letters were to him as sacred relics, and her last he always carried on his person in a sort of superstitious belief in its protective virtue. And the letters did have the mysterious power of protecting him from evil. It happened more than once, when on shore leave he was about to enter some den of

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vice such as the seaport towns abound in, that the mere thought of the Brita's letter in his pocket compelled him to turn back. He began to be ashamed of the habitual pleasures in which he had indulged to blot out the memory of Elsa Wing. But Brita he wanted to remember, hence he was forced to avoid the temptations of the seaport brothels; for if he yielded in the slightest degree he dared not even think of the pure girl at home until he had first shrived his mind by repentance. Out at sea, on the other hand, in storm, in fog, in darkness, she was constantly in his mind, and he cherished the sweet recollection of her bravely, longingly. He took ever greater care to avoid the temptations and dangers against which the spirit of her messages was an indirect warning, and his mind became centered on better things.

Finally one day a letter came which gave him much mental trouble, although it was written in Brita's usual style, tactful

THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

and considerate to a high degree. It contained this question:

“Have you ever chanced to meet a young man named Helmer Branning? He is the only sailor I know. He and I were playmates together...”

It was a modest question, yet it revealed to Helmer the fact that he was not forgotten after all. It caused a warm sensation about the heart and brought tears to his eyes. That simple question cost Helmer a great deal of paper and an enormous amount of brain work. At last he succeeded in framing up a reply made up of fact and fiction in nearly equal parts. It ran thus:

“— — — Yes, I have met a man by the name of Helmer Branning. I found him a man unworthy of a thought from anybody, least of all from one so good and pure-minded as you, for he is quite the reverse. I have seen him drunk and witnessed the wild life he leads, but recently I have lost track of him, just as he has lost track of himself. You ought not trouble yourself to think of such a fellow...”

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This was one of Charles Storm's shortest letters. He awaited the reply with tense expectancy. Almost pale with anxiety he made inquiry one day at the post office at Hull, and his brawny, browned hand trembled as he grasped the looked for piece of mail.

Brita's reply was rather sharp for a tender little woman with balm of healing in her make-up, but the one for whom her upbraidings were meant rejoiced notwithstanding.

"— — — Even though I were as good and pure-hearted as you seem to imagine, and the friend of my childhood were such a wreck as you picture him, I should be all the more deeply concerned on his account. Should you meet him again, please do not pass him by because of his sins, but befriend him and speak to him of the Saviour of sinners, if you yourself know the Lord. I had been hoping that you did, but your way of speaking of your former comrade gives me grave misgivings. If you were a child of God you would speak more kindly of a fellow mortal for whom

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Christ died as He died for you. You would not say that anyone can be too good and pure to take interest in one of God's creatures who was redeemed by the blood of Jesus and at whose repentance the angels of heaven would rejoice. . . ."

So wrote Brita Reiner, and Helmer understood that her heart had been wounded by the uncharitable judgment he had passed on himself. The one fact that she did not give him up for lost after all that she had been told gave him the strength for his own uplift. Was it true, as Brita wrote, that such as he had any worth in the sight of God and the angels? This was to him a new and marvelous thought, which he was unable to dismiss from his mind. It convinced him that it was worth his while to seek salvation, that he had a right to avail himself of Christ's redemption, that there was hope for him after all. That world of purity and light to which he was being drawn by Brita's admonitions, yielding the more readily to her influence by his reawakened longing for


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better things, and from which he had thought himself irrevocably shut out, now seemed to open its gates to him, and he saw his opportunity to reenter.

Brita's touching words, in her last letter to Charles Storm, about her friend from childhood, went straight to Helmer's heart and accomplished what her first little note had set out to do. The prodigal in foreign parts was made to see and feel his own baseness and depravity. He arose and came to his Father.

After that he found it impossible to write to Brita under his assumed name. At first he determined to reveal his identity by letter, but he thought better of it and concluded to do so in person. He would soon be relieved at Hamburg, and thanks to his improved habits of life he had so bettered himself financially that he could well afford a trip back home before hiring out on another vessel. He started for Sweden with plans still unsettled. What he would do after visiting the old home depended entirely on Brita Reiner.

VIII. IN THE HOME OF THE MERCHANT PRINCE.

RIC BRANNING sat in his private office engaged in writing, when the door opened and a clerk announced that a plain man wished to see him on strictly private business.

“Well, show him in,” said the busy merchant; “I know all about these ‘strictly private’ fellows.”

But the man who entered was not one of the nervy beggars he had expected. His clothes were plain and somewhat threadbare at the edges, but he bore himself as a gentleman. It was in fact Eric Branning’s own brother.

“Well, Eric, here I am,” was Helmer’s simple greeting. “I don’t think you will need to be ashamed of me now, just so you will forget ——”

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Eric quickly rose and extended his hand, meanwhile fixing a keen look upon his brother's face. His search must have resulted favorably, for the merchant's stern look softened and his tense demeanor gave way to all the kindliness the hard face of the man of affairs was capable of expressing.

"I am very glad to see you home again," he said. "And sober too." He could not forget their last meeting. "Take a seat, Helmer, and let us talk. My time is pretty well taken up, 'tis true, but to find a long lost brother is an occasion too rare to pass lightly by."

Helmer sat down.

"When I think of how you found me last, it is a surprise to me to see you receive me so kindly," said Helmer cordially.

"Let us forget the past — from now on," Eric suggested, rather flattered at his own magnanimity. "Let us talk about the future. You intend to leave the sea and live like an honest man now, I take it."

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"That I have no intention to do — that is, to leave the sea," asserted Helmer, slightly stung by his brother's insinuation against seafaring as an honest mode of living. "I could never feel at home on land any more, but I hope to remain an honest man nevertheless. I am thinking of taking examination for a captaincy, if I can make it."

"If you can make it," Eric repeated with a benevolent and somewhat self-satisfied smile. "What would hinder you?"

"Well, several things. Lack of money in the first place."

"I thought so. How do you propose to get around that?"

Helmer stared at the floor while he battled with his own feelings. The self-conscious and superior way in which the brother proffered his assistance made it odious to a proud and defiant spirit like Helmer's. He conquered himself, fortunately, and proceeded calmly:

"I once promised never to trouble you

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again after I had made an end of what I had coming from our joint estate. That promise I will keep, if you so desire. Otherwise, should I try for the captaincy, I would be very thankful for a little timely assistance. I will repay you the money without fail, if I live and get work. — Will you help me?"

Eric, accustomed to the cringing attitude of suppliants before men of wealth, had not expected so manly and direct a request. The petition in the very independence of its tone implied that the petitioner was well prepared for a refusal.

"What is your security?" Eric inquired, as if determined to make his brother feel the full force of his subserviency.

"Security — do you demand that? I have no man to go my bond," replied Helmer with a look so honest and determined that it might well have been taken in full security.

Possibly Eric so construed it, and again, perhaps he saw in his brother's open

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declaration an abject confession of his economic and social inferiority. Be this as it may, the magnate promised his impecunious brother a loan without interest and without security. He was moved to so noble and so unusual an act chiefly by a secret consciousness of having at the time of settlement given Helmer too small a sum for his share in their common estate. Here was an excellent opportunity for settling an old and irritating obligation without the humility of owing up to it.

The agreement concluded, Eric excused himself for the press of business matters and dismissed his brother with a cordial invitation to dinner the same day, when they might talk at their leisure.

"One thing more," he warned at parting, "I would prefer you would not mention our meeting in France. I have mentioned it to no one for fear it would only have given certain persons added concern for your welfare."

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The main reason for his silence he did not state, and Helmer, although suspecting the motive, showed no sign of secret comprehension as he cheerfully gave the promise exacted by Eric.

Lady Branning was not a little perturbed when her husband rang her up and told her whom to expect for dinner. What did this mean? Helmer, so long gone and apparently lost in the traceless sea, now suddenly bobbing up again? Had he returned to stir up their past? What sort of man would she find him? An additional source of worry was the fact that she had already invited several friends for dinner that evening. This she had a habit of doing, unbeknown to her husband, so he never knew when he might come home from his office and find the house full of guests. He was not in love with this idea of hers, but that had never bothered her until now that she found it leading to inconvenience and conflicting plans. Would Helmer behave in such a way that she

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would not have to feel ashamed before the other guests? This one problem irritated her nerves all that day. But there was no way out, so the intelligent hostess simply nerved herself to the task before her.

When Helmer entered the drawing room of the Brannings shortly before the hour set, no one could have inferred from Elsa's manner that she was not overjoyed at the return of her brother-in-law and the instant opportunity to introduce him to her friends. Not expecting to meet other guests, Helmer, however, was somewhat taken aback and had difficulty in concealing his displeasure at the surprise. He wondered why Eric had made no mention of this and whispered the question in the host's ear at the first chance.

"Well, to be frank, I knew nothing of it myself," he explained, showing his distaste for the affair while apparently resigned to his wife's arrangement as a matter of course.

Of Eric's success in life Helmer had seen

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some evidence at their last meeting at the French summer resort, and still more that morning while visiting his business office, but not until now, in Eric's magnificent home, at his Lucullian table, together with his elegant and refined inner circle of friends, was he able to gauge the extent of his brother's wealth and influence. He looked at Eric as in a trance. True, this was his brother, and yet not the same as in former days. About Elsa, too, there was to him an appearance of strangeness. In all her vivacity and charm of person there was no trace of that former spell which held him captive.

Lady Elsa Branning was an ideal hostess. Expert in the science of providing dainty dishes for the generous board, she was no less accomplished in the finer art of conducting the conversation along intelligent lines and lending it flavor by her own refined wit. This particular evening the dinner party was made up of men of views ranging all the way from liberal-

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mindedness to rationalism. Every one was free to speak his mind. Helmer listened in silence, puzzled and shocked by turns. Godlessness he had seen much of, blasphemies were familiar to the sailor's ears, all this of the rough, sordid type; but here was a sort of infidelity new to him: men and women of culture and refinement sitting in judgment of things high and holy, and rendering an ignorant and partisan verdict. In this company Elsa was the life and soul, while Eric with seeming unconcern listened to all that was said.

"You look scandalized, Mr. Branning," some one said. "What is your opinion of this new religion?"

All eyes were fixed on Helmer, who felt that his face flushed.

"I know nothing of any new religion," he answered briefly.

"Do you know anything about the old one?" a little lady butted in with fetching pertness.

Helmer would have preferred a hard

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set-to with a storm at sea to an intellectual tilt with this crowd of radicals and agnostics. Still he felt challenged to defend his new-found faith, and he was no coward. So he turned his clear eyes upon the fair questioner and said:

“Yes, this much I know, that if anything can save a drowning man and put his feet on a rock, it is the old religion of Christ, the Saviour of sinners.”

In the silence that followed the face of the hostess colored. She hastened to turn the table-talk into a new channel. Helmer felt guilty of a grave breach against the accepted code of good manners.

Shortly after dinner the other guests departed, leaving Helmer alone with his host and hostess.

“Oh, what a relief to have them out of the way!” Elsa exclaimed, adding with a laugh, when she saw Helmer’s surprised look, “I enjoy to have them, but had I

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known of your coming, I should have asked them here some other time."

"Then you were ashamed of me?"

"By no means, but we could have met and talked with you at ease, without all those irrelevant witnesses. Now, Helmer, sit down here and tell me everything you've gone through."

He obeyed, but felt no desire to confide his experiences to his hostess. She was not to be trusted, he suspected. Who of all these people that had just been the objects of her charming attentions thought for an instant that they had been mere intruders?

"There's not much to be said about me," said Helmer modestly. "I've sailed the seven seas; I've visited most of the great seaports of the world; I've had a pretty rough time of it, off and on, that's all. But how you and Eric have fared these years would make a much better story, I imagine."

"Oh, we have managed fairly well,"

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spoke Elsa with an air of self-depreciation. "Eric is over his ears in business day by day, while I go in for social pleasure, so you see we do not often get into each other's way and have few interests in common."

Helmer hardly knew how to construe her meaning. Did she speak seriously or in jest? He felt perplexed and out of place, as most persons do in having the differences of married people confided to them.

"Do you spend the summers together at Bergdale?" he hazarded in an effort to change the subject.

"No, Bergdale was sold years ago," informed Elsa.

The news was apparently distasteful to Helmer.

The telephone rang; Eric was wanted, so Elsa was left alone with the guest.

"I never would have thought Eric capable of that," he said.

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"And why not? It was a very profitable transaction," she assured him.

"I thought he was too much attached to the old home to let it go out of his hands."

"Why should he be more attached to it than you were?" Elsa queried with a significant smile.

"Well, there were reasons."

"Wasn't it just as bad for you to leave Bergdale as for Eric to sell it?" she pursued, feeling that she had a little the better of the argument.

Helmer made no reply. He wondered whether Elsa was really ignorant of the true cause for his leaving home, or whether she simply feigned ignorance.

"Now, Helmer, you must tell me something about yourself, whether you like it or not," she urged. "I want to know what your plans are, how long you expect to remain in Stockholm, and all that," she added, with a show of intense interest in him, as in former days.

"My plans are very unsettled as yet.

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This time my stay here will be very short. I leave Stockholm to-morrow morning."

"Where do you go from here?" she questioned with a curious glint in her eye, which made Helmer loath to answer, though he found no escape.

"I want to see some of my old friends, so I am going out to my old home."

"Aha, to Cranecroft, then! Give my very best regards to old Lady Crane, if she still remembers her willful companion of bygone days. And be sure to remember me to little Brita Reiner, if you see her."


"Certainly. I intend to look them up, every one," said Helmer, somewhat troubled at his own abrupt tone. It gave him a physical shock to hear Elsa mention the name of Brita in that insinuating tone. There was something degrading about it, he fancied.

After taking tea with Elsa and Eric later in the evening, Helmer left his brother's house with a sense of oppression. Opulence there was indeed in that home,

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but no true happiness. Whose fault was it? Or were they both to blame? He saw full well that Elsa and Eric had had no favorable influence on one another. His brother was most to be pitied, he thought, and with a pang of conscience he recalled the white lie with which he himself had reconciled the two and made them one. He now found that he had given irreparable injury to both and owed a great debt to Eric in particular. For him to have owned to his obligation to both of them for his past offense would have served no good purpose. All that he could do was to pray for them and seek to rectify his error by telling them the truth henceforth.

IX. AN ILL-MATED PAIR.

“OW he has changed for the better!” exclaimed Elsa when Helmer was gone and she was again alone with her husband.

“Why, he is very much like himself,” Eric insisted.

“Indeed not; there’s a vast difference,” Elsa maintained.

“Well, yes, in a way. He is much older and a great deal poorer,” Eric conceded.

“That is not all,” said Elsa, disappointed at her husband’s lack of perspicacity.

“What other change have you found in him, if I may ask?”

“Well, if you couldn’t see it, it would be futile for me to try to explain.”

“Oh, I am no idiot,” Eric cut in, feeling irritated at his wife’s implied scorn for

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his intelligence. "Go on with your explanation, if you have one."

"He is changed through and through. His inner self has undergone a complete ——"

Eric cut her off.

"So you looked through him and saw his inner self," he mocked. "I saw only the surface, and I am glad to say there was a marked change in his appearance. He seems determined to make a man of himself, after all, to get a new start and become a useful member of society."

"You always do take such a businesslike view of things. Have you no other than mercenary demands or requirements?"

"Oh yes; just now I require sleep," yawned Eric rudely.

She regarded him with manifest antipathy. Never before had she seen so plainly what a base, incorrigible materialist her husband was.

"You have sold your soul for gold," she flung at him.

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"If so, I know one who was not opposed to that bargain," was his sharp retort.

The point of the remark went home, but she feigned indifference.

"Helmer is an idealist. Helmer, whom you look down upon, is a better man than you are by a thousand times."

"Why, then, didn't you choose him instead of me? Now it is too late to make the change," parried Eric with the most aggravating indifference.

Elsa stared at him in an effort to discover the sinister meaning in his words.

Eric rose to retire.

"Good night," he said dryly. "I'll now leave you to dream undisturbed about your lost paradise."

He withdrew. Left alone in the room, Elsa sat for a moment in silence, then went over to a window and leaned close to the leaded glass to look up at the starlit sky. In her wrought up state she fancied herself a prisoner behind confining bars,

AN ILL-MATED PAIR

though the bars were of gold. But this sort of life was of her own choosing, why, then, should she complain? She had just lectured her husband for having bartered his soul for money. Had not she done the same? Had not she purchased a comfortable existence with her own person as the price, and then strived to make her own life one of opulence and luxury by spurring her husband's money-making propensity to the utmost? Had she ever sought to stay his mercenary ambition? Was it all his own fault that he had yielded wholly to the lure of gold?

That night Elsa fully realized for the first time her own guilt in the matter, and it filled her with dismay.

At that moment Helmer lay on his knees in fervent prayer for Eric and Elsa, that their eyes might be opened in time.

X. SNUG HARBOR.



RESSED in a big white apron, and with her sleeves rolled up, Brita Reiner sat paring fruit for preserving. Her brothers and sisters were in school, while her father, the forester, was roaming the woods, gun on arm, accompanied by his pointer. The forester's lodge lay in quiet seclusion, basking in the August sun. But the girl's thoughts were not in keeping with the peaceful surroundings. A long time had passed without a letter from Charles Storm, and every day of waiting added to her worry. As she sat at her work, the thought of his failure to write came strongly upon her, ruffling her placid mind to an unusual degree. Had he taken offense at the contents of her last missive, she asked herself. Recalling what she had written, she found it direct

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and to the point, but not offensively sharp. So he must have simply grown tired of keeping up the correspondence, or — she shuddered at the thought — could he have been lost at sea?

She had hoped to learn something further of Helmer, but by the sudden stoppage of interchange with the unknown sailor that hope, too, had gone by the board.

Could it be true, that about Helmer's reckless career? Possibly all had not been told, pondered Brita, for if Helmer was at all like himself, he must have become a great chum of Charles, for the two seemed to her to have many things in common.

Oh, where might her two seafaring friends be now? Were they still among the travelers on life's turbulent sea? If so, did they steer a true course, guided by the beacon light of divine truth, or were they drifting on to the shoals and breakers of unbelief? The girl breathed a silent prayer for the two.

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Suddenly she looked up from her bowl of fruit with a distinct sensation that she was being observed.

A little way off stood a tall, brown-faced stranger mutely watching her.

What did this mean? Had her faith proved so strong, her prayer so efficacious, that the very one who was in her thoughts had been miraculously transported from afar and now stood bodily before her? Her heart stopped for an instant and the rosy cheeks turned pale.

The man mistook the cause. Thinking that he had frightened the girl, he spoke at once:

“Don’t be afraid, Brita! It’s Helmer. Don’t you know me?”

Her whitened cheeks again turned red. She extended her hand, then suddenly withdrew it, mindful of the fruit juice on her fingers.

Again he misunderstood.

“Ah, you will not let me press your hand. I might have expected this.” He

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looked at her with the despair of a cast-away watching a disappearing ship that failed to notice his signals for help.

Then Brita had to smile, and out came the dimple in her left cheek.

"Certainly I will, but my hand was so smeary ——"

"Oh, was that all?" His face lit up instantly, as he grasped the little hand and pressed it warmly between his own.

Brita had sat on the stairway landing by the kitchen door. She resumed her place, and Helmer seated himself on the step next below. They talked of old times and old friends, and of all that had passed since they last met. The heart of the girl was all aflutter, and fumbling with the paring-knife she chanced to cut a small slit in her thumb. She made light of the wound, but Helmer insisted it ought to be cared for. "Small sores and poor friends should not be neglected," he quoted.

"Well, I'll put on some collodium, then," she said, smiling at his solicitous concern.

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As she rose he anticipated her, offering to fetch the preparation.

"You will find the bottle on the top shelf of the whatnot in the corner of my room," she directed.

"The same room you always occupied?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then I'll find it all right."

He disappeared into the house. A room long occupied takes on somewhat of the character of its occupant. When Helmer peeped into the girl's chamber, it seemed like a glimpse into the inner recesses of her being. He hesitated. What right had he to enter this little sanctuary of maidenhood?

There were tones of white and pale blue everywhere, and an air of purity and home cheer pervaded this fresh, sunny, peaceful chamber. His heart warmed as he scanned each object with a look of mingled admiration and tenderness. He had well-nigh forgotten his errand when his eyes fell on

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the corner bracket. He walked reverently across the room, took the bottle from the shelf and returned with guarded step. Turning at the door, he cast a parting glance into the daintily plain little chamber before descending to the floor below.

Returning to Brita, he took her hand and dressed her slight injury tenderly and with the air of a physician treating a very serious case. Brita's admiration for his skill brought a tardy smile to his lips.

"At sea we are all Handy Andys," he said. "You ought to see me handle needle and thread."

She laughed at the suggestion, secretly doubting his ability to do any clever needlework with those big, brown, horny hands.

"Well, I know sailors do sew," she admitted, "for I have had something to do with sending out little handy bags or 'housewives' to the seaman's missions for them."

"I have seen some of those things. The

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- boys would sometimes find little notes from the makers concealed in some pocket."

"Yes, I've sent some myself, and got replies, too."

"It would be interesting to learn who answered, in case I should happen to know any of them."

"One was Charles Storm. Did you ever meet him?"

"Charles Storm," he repeated, as though searching his memory. "Let me think, what sort of a fellow was he?"

"Of course I can't know how he looks, but from his letters I infer that he is a manly and likable person and a great lover of the sea."

"Did he write more than once?"

"Yes, we exchanged letters for quite a while."

"And then you stopped writing?"

"I got no reply to my last letter, and then there was no way of reaching him," she explained with evident regret. "I am

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afraid something has happened to him."

"Do you miss those letters a great deal?"

"Yes, very much indeed."

"Have you kept any of them?"

"Yes, I have them all."

Keeping her eyes fixed on her work, after the lesson she had just learnt, Brita did not notice how intensely Helmer watched her.

"Maybe you'd rather Charles Storm sat here in my place?" he twitted her roguishly.

"I can't tell you how much I'd like to meet him," she owned with girlish frankness.

All that she had suffered on Helmer's account, equally with her feelings for the unknown Charles Storm, caused her to make an open confession of her attachment. Womanly pride, too, combined in forcing it from her. She felt entitled to redress for the years of heart-ache caused by Helmer's lack of responsiveness to her

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ardent affection, the more as he could now sit there calmly analyzing her feelings for another man.

At first, Brita was overjoyed at meeting Helmer once again. Now her heart sank. However, she would not let this opportunity pass: he should be made to understand that another had replaced him in her affections.

"You confess a pretty warm interest in a man whom you have never seen," Helmer remarked.

"If you could read his letters, you would understand the reason why," she replied.

The glowing terms in which she spoke of her unseen friend constantly increased the strain on Helmer's feelings. He was flushed with suspense. What would she think when she learnt of his stratagem?

"Do you recognize this?" he asked, drawing from his pocket her first little note. The sheet was so worn in the folds that it barely hung together.

She seized it, — looked at it, — looked

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at Helmer. What could this mean? Her first suspicion was that it had come into his hands by chance. Her second, that the recipient had given it to him. She flushed with anger at the thought of having her missives treated so lightly. Her indignation changed to dismay as Helmer drew forth another letter, her last one, conveying greetings to himself.

"I have them all, Brita. Now you understand, he said.

"Oh, Helmer, was it *you*?" she exclaimed with an impetuosity that quickly subsided into passive modesty.

So it was with Helmer she had been corresponding! And what had she been saying to him just now, about his letters and himself! The very moment when she thought her feelings securely masked, she had herself betrayed the secret of her heart. Undone, and yet quickened by sweet anticipation, she turned away with a blush of modesty.

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Her mingled emotions were beyond Helmer's comprehension.

"Brita, forgive me for playing this cruel game," he pleaded penitently. She stood silent. "It was a base deception, I confess, but do not judge me too harshly," he went on. "It could not do you any harm, I reckoned, while for me—oh, if you could but know what your letters meant to me! Then you would surely forgive."

"I do forgive you, Helmer," faltered Brita, now that she saw the matter from his point of view. Turning halfway toward him, she forgot her own awkward plight when she saw the helpless figure he made as he resumed:

"Brita, are you very sorry it is I and not 'Charley Storm'? Can't you forget him and think a wee bit of me?"

His serio-comic look and the grim humor of the situation made an irresistible appeal. When he came over and took her hand, still sticky from handling the pears,

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she yielded it willingly. He held it firmly — and long.

“Brita,” he spoke in a low tone of infinite tenderness, “you know I have been drifting. How near I was to complete shipwreck in life you cannot know. But now I am in the right course, thanks to you and the guidance of Him who is the Lord of land and sea and whose Spirit moves upon the face of the waters. Brita, pray, dare you — will you sail life’s ocean with me from now on?”

Brita dared and would. Never once was she given cause to regret the step.

ROBIN GOODFELLOW

BY

MATHILDA ROOS



ON the east slope of the mountain lay the isolated village of Valbo. Above it frowned the scarred features of the great fjeld, but lying far below the tree line, it was separated from the barren region by a dense, dark forest.

The people in Valbo were prosperous and stubbornly independent. For several centuries the houses of the village and the outlying farms had passed from father to son. The fields yielded grain in plenty, and up the green mountain slopes were extensive wild lands, where the Valbo peasants pastured their cattle, sheep, and goats all summer.

It was late one bright autumn evening. The full moon silvered the crests and ridges of the mountain, girded about with the dark belt of forest, while in the broad valley below, the river, falling in successive cataracts, throbbed out the pulse beats of nature in the great silence.

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Most of the villagers had retired for the night, but few lights still gleaming faintly through the little windows. Across the road that wormed its way between the two rows of houses the moonlight fell clear and bright, offsetting clearcut shadows of houses, trees, gables, and chimneys on the graveled surface. Under cover of the shadows, a little figure, about a foot high, with a long, flowing white beard, and a red, pointed hood drawn tightly over his head, stole silently along the dark side of the village street. It was none other than Robin Goodfellow, who was making his rounds, seeing to it that all was in good order in his particular bailiwick. He was a favorite in Valbo, for all believed their good fortune and well-being due in large part to the care and supervision of the little old man.

They knew that he wished them all well. From time out of mind he had dwelt among the villagers of Valbo. From father to son was handed down the tradition that the mysterious little goblin was responsible for their material prosperity, home comfort, and domestic happiness. It was supposed to be due to him that their gran-

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aries and lofts were filled from year to year, that the cows gave an abundance of milk, that calves and pigs survived and grew fat, yielding profit to their owners.

It was the general understanding that if Robin Goodfellow should take offense and disappear, and the little gray-beard should never again be seen busying himself about the barns and haylofts and store-houses, that would forebode evil times for the villagers. Hence young and old were careful to make him feel at home. At Christmas and Easter it was the invariable custom to set a dish of porridge for him in some hidden corner; they never would throw out scalding water for fear he might happen to be prowling around their threshold; and when they finished their meals they were in the habit of leaving on their plates "a bite for Robin Goodfellow."

When the little gray-beard reached the barnyard of Lars-Anders and looked in at the door, there was a satisfied mooing here and there in the stalls, and the cat came suddenly out of the dark, stroking his sides against the legs of his goblin friend, while the chickens slept on their roosts undis-

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turbed but for the needless warning of a watchful cockerel.

The little old man gave a satisfied nod as he stood in the doorway surveying the peaceful scene, then closed the door and proceeded on his tour of supervision.

Before passing the cottage of Claus-Peter, he raised himself on tiptoe and peered through a low window. The flames were still dancing merrily in the fireplace within. Claus-Peter himself was already asleep in the big, wide bed in the living room, where his wife and daughters were still at work spinning woolen yarn by the dim light of the hearth. One of the girls was singing as she span:

The full moon shines adown the glen,
And silence rules the abodes of men.
When evening falls, with gloom and mist,
Abide with us, O Jesus Christ.

The little old man smiled and blew a sharp whiff against the windowpane, causing a slight rattle of the sash.

"What was that?" exclaimed the housewife. "Didn't you hear something at the window?"

"I reckon it was Robin Goodfellow look-

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ing in," said one of the girls. "He might want something to eat." So saying, she rose from her spinning-wheel and putting a portion of porridge left over from supper on a dish, set it on the doorstep outside.

"God bless the little man," said the mistress. "It has always been his custom to go around and see that the lights are out and everything set to rights for the night. We had better go to bed now."

The women put their spinning-wheels aside, and soon all were sound asleep in Claus-Peter's cottage.

But the good little goblin continued his nightly round, feeling of locks and shutters, peeping through chinks and cracks, investigating mangers and feed troughs to see that none of the domestic animals had been overlooked, and if he found some hired man or weary maid-servant who had dropped asleep forgetting to put out the candle light, he would knock at the door or the window until they suddenly started up and snuffed out the candle, fearing the householder himself had discovered their wastefulness.

When Robin Goodfellow had assured

himself that all were asleep in Valbo and everything was in good order, he hastened up the mountain side to visit an uncle of his who was living in the dark forest. He followed a steep path, and his face was lit up with contentment as he tripped along in the moonlight as nimbly as any mortal a fraction of his age might have done. He was thinking of the villagers of Valbo, and how well all had turned out for these farmers in the past season, — all the grain harvested without a drop of rain on it; the haymows propped to the ridge of the roof; bins and cellars and larders filled, and money over from the sale of colts and calves, and pigs for Christmas fattening.

They all liked him, and he did his best to increase their prosperity and contentment. Many there were, he knew, who thought him an evil-minded little elf, and others who did not believe he existed at all, laughing to scorn the simple-minded folk who still had faith in his tribe.

As the good little goblin was tripping along the path, gazing up into the benign face of his old friend the moon, who was looking down through the all but leafless

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boughs of the aspen trees, he failed to notice a trap set right in his path. It was meant for the large game birds of the forest, for which the villagers of Valbo had a decided predilection, whether the game was in season or not. As he passed under the end of a log, he accidentally released the trap, and the log fell, breaking his leg and holding his crushed foot as in a vice.

The little fellow set up a cry of agony, which echoed through the dark recesses of the forest and then subsided into a pitiful plaint. He strained himself to the utmost to lift the log or roll it over, but it would not budge. To pull at the limb gave him unendurable pain; so there was nothing for him to do but to lie there for hours and hours, suffering indescribable tortures.

The hours of the chilly autumn night crawled by at a snail's pace. After midnight even the cheering face of the moon was hidden by dark clouds. The forest grew dismally dark, and the silence was only intensified by the occasional hooting of a night-owl. During these endless hours he lay there thinking of the intense suffer-

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ings of the game birds and other animals caught in snares and traps and left to die by inches during hours and days of agonizing captivity. His heart went out in pity for all his feathered friends, the partridges, the mountain grouse, the heath-cocks, the white grouse, the black cock of the woods, all of which were being hunted and trapped for a bit of flesh to tickle the palate of men who had food in plenty. He reflected on their gay flight over the snowy fields or their whirring course over the tree-tops, when the murderous shot suddenly rings out and they fall dead to earth or flutter downward on broken wing, often to suffer indefinitely until relieved by death. He realized now their dreadful plight when snared or trapped while lightly hopping about in woodland haunts or running along their customary trails.

Then Robin Goodfellow's thoughts turned again to the villagers of Valbo, for whom he had done so many good turns. The kindness turned to bitterness as he thought of how they were sleeping comfortably in their beds while he lay up here in the woods suffering all the pains and agonies endured by myriad other creatures

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before him, though the silent fields and forests never betrayed their hideous secrets. The face of the little old man with the gray beard and the kindly eyes, so shortly before beaming with tenderness, now bespoke naught but evil and revenge as he shook his clenched fist in the direction of the village below.

Morning dawned over the forest. The weird call of the owls was heard no more, but now and then some belated song bird trilled out a cheerful note, while the woodpecker drummed resounding flourishes on the murky stems of dead trees. From the east came a red glare that soon flamed up into a brilliant sunrise. This was the hour when goblins and their ilk were supposed to have slunk away into their hiding-places.

Lo, the first notes of the herdsman's morning song resounded near by. The poor captive trembled with pain and cold. He *must* get away before he was discovered and, possibly, made a prisoner for life, by one of his former friends. So he fell to turning and twisting and jerking, and at length with a violent movement wrenched his limb from under the log,

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leaving the bleeding foot pinned fast in the jaws of the trap. With a howl of pain he extricated himself and hopped on one leg over to some large rocks forming a covert into which he disappeared after clenching his fist once more at the village of Valbo, where the chanticleers were just now crowing to greet the rising sun.

Since that day Robin Goodfellow was never again seen in the village of Valbo. One of the farmers is said to have found a small human-like foot in his trap, and the villagers feared he had eventually been caught and killed in some snare. Two girls who one evening at dusk passed the huge rocks where Robin Goodfellow hid himself claimed that they heard distinctly some one whining pitifully, "Oh, my foot, — my foot!" By and by the clump of boulders became known as the Goblin Rocks.

Many years have now passed since the people of the mountain village of Valbo saw a glimpse of Robin Goodfellow. With him their prosperity and happiness disappeared.

* * *

This story was told to me by Claus-Peter

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of Valbo, the oldest inhabitant, a pious old man, the grandson of the well-to-do farmer by that name who lived in Robin Goodfellow's time.

"A strange story, indeed," said I when the old villager had finished his tale. "Your grandfather, I suppose, often saw the good little goblin?"

"I should think he did — any number of times," said Claus-Peter, as he took the pipe out of his mouth and emptied out the ashes by knocking it against his hard knee-cap.

"Grandfather and the goblin always were such great friends; but the trouble nowadays is," he added regretfully, "that folks don't believe in goblins and things."

"Well, how about yourself, Claus-Peter? Do *you* believe in them?" I asked.

The old man absent-mindedly drew an imaginary whiff of smoke from the empty pipe as he went on:

"Well, I do, and then I don't. When I've been sitting like this in the gloaming I'd often fancy I saw the little gray-beard puttering around, carelessly showing the red tip of his hood sometimes or peeping at me with one eye around the corner.

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And then I'd be thinking something like this: Well, there's better times coming for us in Valbo now. But of course they haven't come just yet," he added, looking regretfully around at the dilapidated dwellings, tumble-down barns, and roofless sheds of the one-time prosperous village. "You may believe it or not, but there's a pinch of truth in the story after all. It teaches us folks to have a bit of pity for nature's dumb creatures, even though we've got to live off of 'em, more or less. There can't be any blessing on needless torturing of the little critters, nohow. I guess folks have got to pay for that, some way or another."

The old man sat pondering deeply for a moment or two, then added:

"Besides, I reckon mebbe our folks up here in the mountains got to believing too much in Robin Goodfellow and too little in the good Lord."





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