

The Story of the Old Spoon

Christmas in Sweden in 1829

It was late afternoon on the day before Christmas and the winter twilight spread a glow over the snow, which reflected into the room where Ingrid sat. This Christmas was different from other Christmases of her life. For more than half a century she had shared these joys with Gustaf but not so this one. She sat in quiet reverie when out of the stillness about her, came the enthusiastic voice of a child:

"O, Grandmother, what a broken old spoon! Why don't you throw it away?"

"No, my child, to me it is very dear. Together we were young and bright and graceful. Together we toiled through many years. Together we grew old and worn and bent."

"Tell me about this old spoon, Grandmother."

"If you will come and snuggle up close to me, I shall tell you the story as the spoon itself might tell it if it could speak."

The life of this spoon began during a Christmas season, long ago. Let us go back to the year 1829, in the little country of Sweden. A mantle of snow enshrouds all nature. Tall pines on the mountain sides, stand as a protective barrier against the frigid winds from the polar region. In that northern country the winter nights are long; in fact, they extend from mid-afternoon of one day to mid-forenoon of the following day, and the low-hung sun of the intervening hours offers scant warmth to the frozen landscape.

The Christmas holiday season extended over a period of three weeks of merrymaking and visiting. Those prolonged festivities, with their added candle light, lent an aspect of cheer to the long winter nights which created a spirit of joy in every home.

During this time there lived in the town of Oshult a merchant with his wife and several daughters. The housewife had been busy for many days, preparing special foods characteristic of the season. The Christmas festivities were ushered in at the noon-day meal of the day before Christmas, when the family, and perchance some guests, gathered in the kitchen for *dopp i grytan*. This quaint custom came down from generations back and every household looked forward to it as a most enjoyable occasion. For several days leading up to it, time was canceled, day by day, in a sing-song rhyme like this, *Dagen för*

dagen för doppar dagen (the day before the day before the dipping day).

At the appointed time the large iron kettle, with its content of meats, pork and fresh sausages, filled the room with a teasing aroma. The juicy meats and the shiny lengths of sausage were lifted to a large platter and arranged in a generous heap. Now the kettle, with its steaming broth, held the interest of all the diners. Everyone was given a plate and fork with a large slice of bread, and, with this equipment in hand, they formed into line, ready for the dipping.

The object was to pick up the bread with the fork, dip it into the hot broth and land it on the plate, while still intact, each one taking his turn. This gave keen enjoyment when watching others, but it became embarrassing fear when being watched by others. If, by chance, the bread slipped from the fork and sank to oblivion in the hot broth, there went up a shout of laughter and jovial derision by the others, while the loser grabbed for a large spoon, by means of which he tried to rescue some of the illfated morsels. This dipping was a real task to one not familiar with culinary ways; never-the-less, it gave the intended merriment to the initiation of the Christmas festivities.

The jug of homemade *dricka* was always at hand on these occasions. This was a drink which sparkled and foamed and was pleasing to the taste but which did not intoxicate. However, it did maintain the ancient custom of *skål* about the festive board, which added much to the joyful gathering.

After the noon-day meal was ended, the Christmas tree was brought in and decorated in candles which had been dipped in the home, with ginger-bread men and quaint animals which the mother had made, in candy hearts and stars, and bright apples. While this work still was in progress the shadows of night settled down over the landscape and the stars came out and decorated the trees about the home.

The evening meal of this day before Christmas (*Julafton*) invariably had its *lut fisk*, a prepared dried fish, and its *risgröns gröt*, a dish of rice cooked in milk. Tucked into the rice was a single blanched almond, which privileged the finder to make a happy rhyme for the occasion. In this merry mood the day ended and all were off to bed, as on Christmas morning there was early mass and all must attend.

All the household was astir early on Christmas morning. Soon groups of people were on their way to the stately old church in the city, while all over the countryside moved trains of sleighs with jingling bells in arches over the horses' backs, and large groups of pedestrians carrying torches moved on toward the churches which stood as monuments to each community.

Nature still lay wrapped in the robe of night and bright stars spread a soft light over the slumbering landscape. All was quiet; a profound silence, which breathed of the Holy night, when angels heralded the babe of Bethlehem. The jingle of sleigh bells and the jostling of church-goers was the only sound that broke the silence.

All churches were richly illuminated with candles at the windows, which spread streams of light out over the snow. The chandeliers within held innumerable candles and everywhere there was a profusion of light in commemoration of the light seen by shepherds on the plains of Judea nearly twenty centuries before.

At the time set for worship the peals of church bells rang out, filling the night with beauty of sound. As the chimes died away, there burst forth from the organ gallery the notes of the Christmas psalm, "Hail to Thee Beautiful Morn," and as if by magic each soul was set in harmony to the message from the pulpit, "Glory to God in the Highest, on Earth Peace, Good Will Toward Men."

In that year when the Christmas season was but three days spent, there came a son to the home in Oshult. The father had long wished for a son and as he himself was one of eight brothers, this had sustained the hope of a son in his own family; now that joy was his.

It was the custom that the rite of baptism be administered soon after birth and it also was customary for friends to give baptismal gifts and a most appropriate gift was a silver spoon. Under these circumstances the old spoon, which then was bright and new, was presented to the babe in the home.

Gustaf's Youth

In a few years Gustaf grew to be an active child; however, at an age when a boy needs both the love of a mother and the counsel of a father, little Gustaf's father died. He was nine years old and had a brother, two years younger, whose name was Ulrick. The mother called her two sons to her one day, saying:

"How would you boys like to go to Aunt Sarah's home for a while? Your uncle will be good to you and you can attend school there."

"I will like that," said Gustaf, "but you will go too, won't you, Mother?"

"I can't, Gustaf; but you are big now and your uncle will take care of you."

And so it was that the boys lived in the country for two years following the death of their father. At the end of this time Gustaf was ready for more advanced school work and was sent to Vexjö for three years. He then was of the age when the state church required its young people to attend confirmation school in their home parish and this took him to his home the following year. At the end of that year Gustaf was ready for military training and was sent to Kristianstad, where he underwent strenuous training in Vende's artillery for three years.

When he was dismissed from military training he was a young man and it was now necessary to plan the kind of work he was to enter. An opportunity presented itself where he could learn the tanning trade and he accepted this offer. This required two years of apprentice work, and when that time was completed Gustaf was 21 years old. His certificate of trade gave him opportunity to enter business and to make a living for himself. Perhaps it would also open new opportunity to enjoy some of life's pleasures.

The young women admired Gustaf's stately military bearing and his jovial manners won friends for him everywhere. His work took him to Eksjö; and one evening, together with other young men, he attended a theater where a magician exhibited clever tricks. Whether by chance or not a group of young women, who were friends of Gustaf's companions, were also in attendance, and after the show Gustaf was given an introduction to the young women. During the informal conversation which followed Gustaf stepped up to one of the girls and they walked together out of the theater.

The young lady was rather shy but courteous and her sense of humor appealed to Gustaf's good nature. In the course of the walk he learned that she too had recently come to Eksjö

from Jönköping and during the conversation he had opportunity to study the winsome face at his side, and in the days that followed its sweet comeliness often came to mind as he worked at his task of tanning.

That was in the days when emigration to America was on the increase, and from those who had gone over the message came back that the outlook was good and others were urged to come. Perhaps the unfavorable conditions of the common people and the compulsory military training were resented; perhaps most of all the opportunities of a new country awakened the great appeal to go to America.

Gustaf had become interested; and as he went about his work, as he mingled with the young folks, as he went to church and joined in singing the old psalms, there arose in his soul the urge to go to America. At times he became bewildered to know what to do and especially was this true when he thought of his home which still claimed his love. There was a mother, sisters, and a brother; and too there was the trim young woman whom he met at the theater. During many weeks he questioned himself. Then one day the urge to go conquered; but why could not the young lady go with him?

Early springtime was in the air when Gustaf one evening went to ask Ingrid to go with him to America. She listened as he pleaded his cause but she told him that she must consider a question so grave. She too had a widowed mother, sisters, and brothers who were dear as life itself.

When Gustaf had gone, Ingrid's thoughts drifted back to her home outside of Jonkoping where she was born on January 15, 1830. She also was a young child when her father passed away and her oldest brother became the head of the home. She recalled the garden with its beautiful flowers about the home. There were fragrant Easter lilies, lilacs, lilies-of-the-valley, marigolds, love-in-the-mist, and balsam. In the rye field grew the cornflower in its maze of deep blue, the field of flax reflected the blue of the sky, and in the meadow grew the dainty forget-me-nots. She recalled the beautiful birches in the woods whose white bark somehow always reminded her of some recent ghost story told at the family hearth.

How well she remembered the day when she must go out to make her own living, and how her mother impressed upon her young mind the beauty of a clean honest life, and sent her forth with a whispered blessing of mother love: In Jönköping she had held a position as seamstress in a dressmaking shop. The sewing machine had been invented but the price was prohibitive and the sewing still was done by hand. The madam in charge of the shop visited Paris once each year to secure new styles for her customers. When she was in Paris she dressed

three dolls to use as models of new styles and from these her patrons selected their "individual" style.

Then she remembered the evening at the theater when she first met Gustaf. Now new plans presented themselves and there was someone besides herself to consider; someone who had asked her to leave all that was dear to her and go with him to a new country with a new language and no friends.

Romance And A Honeymoon

Nature provides opposites in summer and winter in most countries. Sweden with its long winter nights nearly blots out night in the summer time. As if to compensate for the beauty of moonlight, she gives generous hours of twilight, and during these hours the landscape becomes enchanted. Old and young are lured to the village green by this beauty and they dance and play until the wee hours of morning. The Swedish people become a part of this glorious season of merrymaking, and to young lovers it naturally stands out as a happy time for weddings.

It was the twenty-fourth of June, 1854, and there was hustle and bustle about the little home of "Bårarp" for that was Ingrid's wedding day. The rooms were decorated with flowers from the garden. The guests were assembled and numbered an hundred in all. These included the people of the community (by folk) and friends from Jönköping.

At ten o'clock in the morning Ingrid and Gustaf walked over to where the officiating minister waited. Ingrid wore a dress of black wool with front and cuffs of white lace and tulle. On her head rested the customary wedding crown made from myrtle leaves, while encircling this and resting on her hair was a wreath of myrtle flowers. During the marriage ceremony the golden ring was slipped over Ingrid's finger and she became the wife of Gustaf.

(The custom of the bride wearing a wedding crown is still in vogue in most of Sweden though now the church generally has a crown, made of some metal, which it loans to the bride for the occasion.)

The trunks had been packed and sent on to Jönköping. One of them was to serve as larder on the journey, and into this one Ingrid's mother had placed bread, cheese and cured meats which had been made in the home. These must serve as many meals along the salt-sprayed highway of their wedding trip. One trunk contained bed linen and Ingrid's trousseau and all of these things were home grown, homespun, and homemade.

The day after the wedding there was rush and commotion in bidding farewell to mothers, sisters, brothers and friends. A sister to Ingrid was going along to America and this eased her heartache in the parting hour. They drove to Jönköping and from there they went by boat over Lake Wetteren and through Göta canal to Göteborg (Gottenberg), where they visited friends for a few days. They went by boat to Christiania (Oslo), Norway, where they took passage for the ocean voyage.

At the dock lay the high-masted sailing vessel, and when Ingrid saw it the seriousness of the moment welled up in her heart and tears came to her eyes; but quickly she thought, "Why should I be sad? Has not Gustaf promised that in two years we will return? Two years will quickly pass by in a land of romance and fortune."

The sails were unfurled and all went on board, and from the deck they waved farewells with a flutter of kerchiefs as the vessel glided down the fjord. As they reached the open sea, land soon faded from view and their thoughts turned to the vision of a new country on the other side of that great stretch of water.

As Gustaf was a methodical man, he took a notebook from his pocket and in it he noted down the day and time of leaving port. A stiff wind suddenly came in from the sea, sweeping over the bow of the ship and Gustaf buttoned up his coat. The sailors readjusted the sails, and their mien evidenced their feeling as to the misfortune of an unfavorable wind from the start. Gustaf still held the notebook in his hand and he added one more word to that which he already had written. That word was *motvind* which means, *the wind against us*.

The vessel struggled on and on. First one week passed, then two and three; now a month had passed and by the end of another week all of July was in the past, but still they sailed on into the west, and at the end of most days Gustaf jotted down in his diary the word *motvind*. As a whole the voyage was rough. Once during a storm a sailor who was working in the high mast lost his hold and fell into the water. The vessel slowed down, a life boat was lowered and he was rescued. When in mid-ocean the main mast blew down, crashing through the floor of the deck and causing great commotion.

After several weeks out at sea an epidemic of dysentery broke out which soon claimed its prey. One morning the passengers were summoned to the deck to attend the first burial of the voyage. The corpse, wrapped in sailcloth, rested on a plank which had been raised to the edge of the railing and remained in that position during the time the chaplain repeated the funeral rite. Then the plank with its burden was lowered to the edge of the water and the lifeless form was slipped under the waves.

The deaths increased and it seemed that those in charge of the funerals had grown accustomed to their solemn task and in place of lowering the plank to the water the bundle containing a form dear to someone on board was shoved from the plank as it rested on the railing and the thud and splash that it made as it struck the water made a gruesome impression on

all; while stealing in over their consciousness came the question, "Who will be next?"

The vessel was of 250 passenger capacity and comforts of travel in those days were nothing more than real necessities. Passengers provided and prepared their own food. A fireplace on deck served all for cooking their meals and after the struggle of preparing the food it was eaten while sitting about on deck.

Most of the passengers loitered on deck when the days were calm, and on these days when the sun sank into the distant water it paved a golden path from the ship out toward their new home somewhere in the west. The beauty of the sunset was suggestive of music and someone would pick up an accordian and from it call forth a waltz from the homeland. This sent the homesick feeling adrift and soon the floor of the deck was filled with couples swaying to the time of the waltz, while out on the rippling waves the light of the moon danced also. It was on such an occasion that Ingrid tread her last waltz and her partner was the captain of the ship.

Thus through pleasure and sorrow the whole summer was spent out at sea. The long chain of days which stretched back over the Atlantic were now adding days of September to their number. They were long tedious days; the food had lost its flavor; surroundings had become commonplace and untidy; a longing for change had taken hold of the passengers; regret had nearly blotted out anticipation; ambition was on the wane; and illness courted the strongest. But in the midst of their growing anxiety there appeared a dark line on the horizon which was an answer to their struggling faith in their objective, America.