

Simon The Cobbler

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Great is the Lord,
And terrible in anger!

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

Great is the Lord,
Hear how we praise Him!

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

Great is the Lord,
Creator of beauty!

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

Great is the Lord,
Giver of gladness!

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

Great is the Lord,
Fountain of plenty!

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

Great is the Lord,
Righteous in anger!

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

Great is the Lord,
Plenteous in mercy!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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