

A BREACH OF FAITH

By HJALMAR HJORTH BOYESEN.

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Lawson, rising, stuck his knife into his pocket and grasped his visitor's hand.
"Wait a minute," he said, "and I'll go with you."

CHAPTER VI.



"What can the young man do?"

The grocer reappeared presently in his holiday attire of black broadcloth, and with the silk hat set askew upon his head. Having obtained the young man's note of hand he took his arm, ushered him on board a street car and seated himself solemnly at his side. They rode for twenty or thirty minutes up one street and down another, through a bewildering turmoil of traffic, and stopped at last before a huge, ugly brick block, across the walls of which a succession of colossal gilt letters traced the inscription: "The Norman Reaper & Mower Co." Through the windows could be seen big wheels revolving, and straps of leather bolting flying up and down, lengthwise and crosswise, while the glow from the mouths of the furnaces showed black figures with leather aprons moving to and fro like cyclops in subterranean smelters. There was a whirling, a rattling, and a hammering, a rapping of saws and clanking of metal,足以 to split one's ears. The whole enormous building seemed to be trembling with an intense white heat activity.

Gunnar and his companion paused for a moment to contemplate the structure, and then entered an outer office on the second floor, in a part of the building which was separated from the factory by a wide hall. Lawson wrote his name on a slip of paper and begged a doorkeeper to hand it to Mr. Norman. The reply was so returned that if he could wait for half an hour Mr. Norman would be at leisure.

Gunnar did not dare to ask the question which was troubling him on his lips: Who was this Mr. Norman? Surely not his father. A rich and tall man he must be, since such a great factory was named after him. And yet, who could tell? He feared Lawson would think him foolish if he ventured to utter what was in his mind. At last, when the half hour was at an end, and three men had entered and left the smaller room, partitioned off from the main office by a wainscoted wall of oak, the doorkeeper conducted the two expectant Norsemen into the chief's presence. Gunnar found himself face to face with a robust man of forty-five, with a brown beard sprinkled with gray, and fine, energetic features. He was carefully, almost fashionably dressed, but there was in his bearing something angular and uncomposing, a kind of homespun, blunt directness. His expression was, however, a trifle worried and his eyes were restless. He looked like a strong man with a bad conscience.

"I thought I'd drop in and see you," began Lawson uneasily.

"How much?" asked Norman quickly: "tell me how much you demand. You know I have no time for fooling. And please give me a respite now. I think I've earned it."

"How do you do?" grumbled the grocer. "I haven't said a word about money. I just brought you this young man, who is looking for a job. You'd oblige me if you could give him a position of some kind in the office or the factory."

The manufacturer, bridling his impatience, fixed his eyes with a startled glance upon Gunnar. The Norse type in the youth was unmistakable—the frank blue eyes, half appealing in their trustfulness; the blonde hair brushed back from the forehead with a sort of rising wave; the short, strong, regular teeth, and a certain amiable rusticity in manner and bearing. Norman saw perhaps even more, but knowing that his uneasy conscience was apt to play him tricks dismised the memories which rose up before him.

"What can the young man do?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone, turning to Lawson.

"Oh, I guess he can do almost anything."

"That's the same as to say that he can do nothing."

"I reckon that he can earn his board and lodgings, and that is about all he expects to do for the present."

"Very well, I'll find him a place. It is a pity he doesn't understand English."

"You may well say so; and he was born in the state of Minnesota."

"Great Scott! Don't I know the work of these isolated persons! A native of the United States, 18 or 19 years old, who doesn't understand the language of his country! You'd have to travel all over the globe to find another case like it. But those little Lutheran popes, they know what they are about. From the moment their people learn English and can assimilate American ideas they are lost to the person. They can no longer be guided and bullied and threatened with eternal damnation if they think a little for themselves, and indulge a little heresy on the subject of the infallibility of the Norwegian Lutheran synod."

This was, as Lawson knew, a sore topic with Norman. He was intensely American in sentiment, and rated against the Norwegian clergy for isolating their countrymen from the national life and discouraging them from learning the English language.

"I pay that young fellow a good salary if he had had an English common school education," he went on indignantly, "but in order to keep his pure Lutheran faith undiluted he has been allowed to grow up in ignorance in a parochial school, fed on the hucks of doctrinal squabbles, and studiously kept an alien in the midst of this rich and magnificent country, to be a citizen of which ought to be a source of pride to any man."

Lawson, who had always tried to keep a safe middle ground on this question, being a Norwegian among Norwegians and an American among Americans, regarded it as imprudent to commit himself, and therefore only nodded an equivocal approval and murmured:

"H'm, yes; that's a fact! Shouldn't wonder."

It was soon settled that Gunnar was to be employed in the factory at a salary of \$8 a week, with the promise of advancement as rapidly as his usefulness

warranted. He had sat gazing silently at the big railroad map which covered one wall of the office while Lawson and Norman settled his fate, being unable to comprehend their language. It was a relief to him to follow the thick red lines across the continent, intersecting with thinner red lines and black lines, for it enabled him seemingly to divert his thoughts from the all-absorbing consciousness which glowed and labored within him that this was indeed his father. Indignation on his mother's account was at first his uppermost feeling, but on the other hand, it seemed difficult to believe of a man with a face like that he could not tear himself away. Suddenly, as he looked up, he saw the chief standing with his hands on his back gazing at him. As Gunnar paused, Mr. Norman took up the piece of metal at which he had been filing and examined it critically. "Look here, Finn Varsko," he said, "you are not a bad workman."

Gunnar blushed with pleasure. He had never heard Mr. Norman praise any one before.

"Have you any brothers?" asked the chief, after a while as he laid down the metal.

"No. I have neither brothers nor sisters."

"And your parents, are they dead?"

"My mother is alive, but my father—"

"Is dead. Yes, I supposed so. And you had to go out into the world to earn your living. I suppose you send part of your earnings to your mother?"

"Yes, as much as I can spare."

"That's right. I am glad you are a good son. That is what I like to hear."

About a week after this conversation Mr. Norman again paused in front of Gunnar's bench. "How much do you pay for your board?" he asked.

"Five dollars a week."

"I live alone. If you will take a room in my house you may pay it for extra work which I will give, mostly copying and mechanical drawing. You'll then be able to send five dollars more every week to your mother."

"But do you think, sir, that I'll be able to do that kind of work?"

"Leave that to me. I know what I am about."

"But, sir, I don't think I can accept it."

"Well, do as you like. You may give my answer to-morrow."

When he got home that night Gunnar was grieved for his blackened hand, which had been taken from his arm, when he had caused his poor, abandoned wife during all these years. But to do this he must follow Norman's example. He must disguise himself. What form his vengeance was to take he could not decide on the spur of the moment, but he would unmask the impostor, hold him up before the community whose admiration he courted as the black hearted monster he was. And to this end he would instantly set about learning English. He would devote all his energies to it and accomplish it in the shortest possible time.

He started palpably while nursing this passionate purpose when Mr. Norman addressed him, but understood presently that it was to write his name in a book. His transparent face bespoke the tumult that agitated his heart. He began to divine that Lawson, who was probably the only one in possession of Mr. Norman's secret, had made it as profitable to himself as possible; and that now, when the manufacturer was beginning to tire of his blackmail, he was turning it to fresh account in similar transactions with the opposite side. All these reflections flashed through his brain as he received the pen from Lawson's hand. He stooped down over the ledger and wrote Finn Varsko.

Norman glanced curiously at the signature and closed the book.

"Finn Varsko," he murmured, "that is a curious name."

CHAPTER VII.

Two years passed rapidly and Gunnar became proficient in English. He took a lesson of hour every evening from his landlady's daughter, the charming Mathilda, who, when the student with the beer glass had taken French leave (neglecting to settle his beard bill), pitied the solitary young man from the backwoods, and taught him a variety of things besides English grammar. She was a curious mixture, this fascinating Mathilda, and Gunnar, though not lacking in common sense, found himself unable to judge her. Two attributes, however, he learned to distinguish in her. He took her to be admirably simple and kind hearted and full of good impulses. But she could not deny that she was an outrageous flirt. He imagined, too, that she put up with him sometimes because she pitied his loneliness, and at other times for want of anybody more desirable. When you can't get tobacco to smoke, they say in Norway, moss is a fair substitute. Anything of the masculine gender was fair game for Mathilda, and her time hung heavily on her hands when no masculine creatures were about. Her mother affirmed that a flirtatious disposition was so deeply ingrained in her nature that it was useless to blame her for it. She had, the same authority asserted, winked at her when she was born.

It is told to the credit of our hero that he rebelled against this project. It was justice he wanted, justice for his deluded, sorrowing mother, who had been cheated at the expense of her life's happiness when living in America. He could make his escape, he said, and she hoped sincerely he would show that he had the grit of a tiger and would allow no foolish malicious sentiment to interfere with his plan. When he had ascertained beyond the shadow of doubt that Mr. Norman was the same as Hans Matson, then was his opportunity. He must then threaten disclosure and make the best terms possible for pledging himself to silence.

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