

The SKOGFRAU'S
CHRISTMAS GIFT
BY CHAS. H. ROBINSON

A

HA! KARA barn, the smell of thy coffee is like the taste of wine to the thirsty after my long tramp in the crusty snow," and Karl the iron-founder threw off his huge skin coat and emptied at a gulp the brimming cup of coffee handed him by his sister Olga. Then placing a finger on his lip:

"Var stilla, my Olga, I have something to tell thee, but yonder little pitcher has long ears. So," he continued, turning to a mite of a girl sitting sedately near the blazing fire-place, intently engaged in thumbing a well-worn primer book, "thou art studious, min lilla flicka, as I told thee to be. Come hither, my little maid, and show me thy book."

He took the book quickly offered him, and deftly placing in it something he secretly drew from his pocket, thrust it out of sight behind him.

"Dost remember, sweetheart, that I told thee the rooster pictured on the front page of thy book would bring thee something if thou wert good?"

"Ja, brother Karl, and so I have been good; ask sister Olga," said the child, smiling up into his face.

"Indeed, yes," answered Olga, drawing the little sister close into her arms, and giving her a hug and a kiss. "Thilda is always sweet and good."

"Well, then, let us see what the rooster has brought thee, my Thilda." Opening the book, Karl pretended to be amazed at something he saw, and showing it to Olga, she raised her hands in well-assumed astonishment. Thilda, unable to restrain her curiosity, suddenly seized the book carelessly held in Karl's huge hand just within her reach, and opening it, uttered a shout of delight as she drew forth a beautiful white candy dog, with a pink ribbon round its neck.

"Thank you, good Karl," she said simply, pouting up her lips for a kiss.

"Nay, child, 'tis not me thou hast to thank, but the rooster," he explained, adding: "Now, min lilla flicka, thou knowest that the good Johan is far away from home, wilt go into thy chamber and pray for thy sister's betrothed? I have that to say to her which thou mayst not hear. Good child," he continued, patting her head as she turned obediently to obey.

"I have some news, my sister, about thy sweetheart. It is of some importance, since it tells me that thy Johan still lives."

"May the good God so ordain," said Olga fervently, "and may He restore him to my arms."

"Amen," murmured Karl, "but to the news. 'Tis now three days since Johan went into the dark forest to cut the *ävs* for the Jul Tieden and returned not as he should have done that same night. The next day we found his ax buried deep in a tree, as thou knowest, but all other trace of him was lost. Well, to-day we penetrated as far as the gloomy Falun mine and found his empty wallet."

"And—and—thou didst follow his steps in the snow?" stammered Olga.

"Tell me quickly, Karl, my brother." "That is what we did not do, Olga, for the reason that there were no footprints in the snow. The wallet could not have been cast there by any one, for we tracked a circle of a hundred yards and found the snow unbroken. Moreover, a piece of ore was laid upon it as if to prevent its being blown away. It was placed there, but not by Johan, Olga."

"Thank God, he has found a shelter there, some miners, perhaps. He may even now be on his way to me," said Olga, joyously. "Go quickly, my brother, to meet him."

"Do not raise thy hopes too high, my sister, neither let thy heart sink. Thy Johan is alive, true, but the hand that placed his wallet where it was found was not that of a mortal. Nay—be not alarmed," he said, putting an arm around her, for the girl was seized with a fit of trembling. "Be brave, my sister, and all will be well if thou wilt be guided by me."

"In anything and everything, my brother," said Olga, clasping her hands. "My soul for Johan's if need be."

"Not that, kara soster, not that shall be required of thee, but bravery thou must show, little woman, such bravery as few men dare show. Thy Johan's return depends upon thee."

"I am ready to face death himself," said Olga, "only tell me what to do."

"Listen, then. I would do it for thee myself, but thou alone canst face the ordeal. I believe the Skogfrau—"

"Oh, my God, the Skogfrau, the terrible forest witch," cried the terror-stricken maiden, falling on her knees and holding up her hands to heaven. "Spare my Johan, oh, heaven!"

"So this is thy bravery," said Karl sternly. "Rise from thy knees and serve thyself for an ordeal that is not difficult, but requires bravery to tell thee. Wouldst lose thy Johan forever? The Jul Tieden begins at midnight, and at that hour thou must stand alone upon the spot where Johan's wallet still lies, and demand a gift from the Skogfrau. She cannot refuse thee if thou art the first mortal to demand it at that hour. 'Tis thy only hope, for she has lured Johan

night must not pass ere thou art there."

"But Thilda? We cannot leave the dear child here alone."

"'Tis all arranged with Dame Thekla," explained Karl. "We shall take the child thither and she will sleep well. Thilda, min lilla flicka!" called Karl to the child, "come hither. Hast prayed for Olga's Johan, child?"

"Ja, my brother, and the good God tells me he shall come home again."

"Then so shalt it be, my sweet child, but come, wouldst like to taste Frau Thekla's seed cakes, eh? I thought as much. Well, thou shalt as soon as I can carry thee thither. Come, sweetheart; come, Olga."

Though wrapped in the warmest of furs, Olga shivered as she stood alone

"In the name of the Christ Child, I demand a gift of thee," was all that Olga could utter in her terror. It was a terrible old hag who stood before her and her aspect was threatening.

"Some paltry thing, I wish, a ribbon, a jewel. Speak, mortal, whatever it may be, 'tis thine."

Growing bolder, Olga spoke more firmly: "Thou hast promised, and in the name of the Christ Child thou must keep thy promise. 'Tis not a ribbon, or a jewel, but my Johan, my betrothed, I demand of thee as thy gift."

"Johan, thy betrothed!" shrieked the hag. "Girl, thou art mad. Get thee gone, and at midnight on the Jul Afton I will bring thee a jewel such as none can boast, but not Johan. He is mine, I tell thee, mine forever. I

Olga fell fainting in the snow, but the faithful Karl revived her and brought her safely home.

"Now, my sister, thou must prepare for the Jul Afton, the eve of the great day when the Christ Child was born. Do not fear, thy Johan will come at midnight, as the terrible old hag of the forest said. I will help thee prepare trenches of snow-white lutfisk, and heaps of kott bolar. We must have a mountain of seed cakes and keep filled with smoking punch the huge bowl thy father left thee. We must not forget the coffee, kara soster, oceans of it, nor the salt pig and the baskets of spice bread. We shall have the village there, and all be ready to greet Johan with a loud 'skald,' for he will be sadly in need of it. And the pastor, Olga, he must be there and he must remain there, and thou must be ready and willing to

taking point and laden with savory toothsome viands. Presents were dragged out from their hiding places and marked with loving mottoes, and the names of the favored recipients. There was a general scrubbing, cleaning and dusting, and a freshening up of holiday garments and finery.

The men drowned themselves in coffee, punch and branvin and shouted themselves hoarse with oft-repeated "skald." The women gossiped and cooked and gossiped, while the chubby children crammed their stomachs with unwonted cakes and sweetmeats unmolested. Everything was free for the taking and the privilege of freedom was accorded everybody.

Olga threw her doors wide open to the whole village, promising a wonderful surprise. Many thought she was not very considerate on Johan's account, thinking she would better be going around with tearful eyes and loud lamentations, but they ate freely of her good things none the less. Simple souls, they were not aware that the lost Johan was to be the great surprise. Of course, everybody and given him up for lost, and they were amazed that Olga should be the merriest maiden in the village, and that her home was to be the very center of the merrymaking on the Jul Afton. The pastor had been forewarned by Karl, and the good soul came prepared to fight the wicked troll for the salvation of Johan and Olga.

The board groaned beneath the weight of good cheer, and the huge bowl was kept constantly brimming with steaming punch. There was no formal banqueting, everybody eating when the humor seized him, and drinking whether thirsty or not, because good drink was there to be had without the asking. The whole village was there waiting for the surprise and nerving themselves up to withstand it by distending their stomachs. None but Olga, Karl and the pastor knew what it was to be, and even they did not know in what shape it would come.

At last the first stroke of midnight. Olga turned pale, Karl stood at attention and the good pastor grasped his holy book firmly in his hand. The last stroke was still ringing in their ears when a violent gust of wind shook the house and the dragging of heavy chains over the roof brought terror to the inmates. The door was burst open by some invisible force and a heavy bundle was hurled in among the amazed roysterers. An old wizened hag appeared in the doorway and screamed out above the confusion: "Girl, take the gift of the Christ Child, but beware of my vengeance. Shouldst thou accept any other gift before thou hast fully accepted this, then shall it return to me and be mine forever."

Johan was quickly restored by copious libations of hot punch, and when able to stand on his feet, Karl put his hand in that of Olga and gave the pastor a signal. Forthwith, Olga took Johan for her husband, and when the final words were spoken, a tempest again shook the house, heavy chains were again dragged across the roof, and after shrieks of demoniac laughter, all was still without.

With tears and laughter, Olga grasped her brother's hand, and then threw herself into the arms of her husband, the gift of the Christ Child, forever free from the thralls of the Skogfrau.



"Johan, thy betrothed!" shrieked the hag. "Girl, thou art mad. Get thee gone, and at midnight on the Jul Afton I will bring thee a jewel such as none can boast, but not Johan. He is mine, I tell thee, mine forever. I will not give him up," and she raised her arm as if to strike, but now Olga feared her not.

into her power, and if thou shalt demand him in the name of the Christ Child she may not refuse thy request, since at this season she loses her power and is at the mercy of mortals, but once only."

"Thou wilt be close beside me, my brother?" asked Olga, shivering.

"Within five hundred paces is a charmed circle which none but thou may enter, but I will be just beyond it and hear thy call for aid should aught happen requiring it. Thou must stand alone upon the spot and say three times, 'Skogfrau, in the name of the Christ Child I demand a gift of thee.' Three times, remember, my sister. She may appear terrible in her wrath and threaten thee and thy Johan, but fear not, she will be powerless either to harm thee or him. Come, prepare, for the way is long and mid-

amid the silent, gloomy, wintry waste of the forest. Not long had she waited ere distinctly through the awful stillness came the clanging strokes of midnight which Karl rung upon the barrel of his gun with a hammer to warn her of the time. With a clear but quivering voice the girl called out three times: "Skogfrau, in the name of the Christ Child, I demand a gift of thee. Skogfrau, in the name of the Christ Child, I demand a gift of thee. Skogfrau, in the name of the Christ Child, I demand a gift of thee. For a moment there was intense silence, then came a rushing sound as of a tempest approaching, and a rasping voice spoke to her:

"Why troublest thou me, mortal? Dost thou not know that I can blast thee with a breath? Speak, what wilt thou?"

will not give him up," and she raised her arm as if to strike, but now Olga feared her not.

"In the name of the Christ Child I demand Johan of thee. Thou hast promised whatever I might ask, and I will have no other gift from thee."

In vain the old crone raved and cursed and begged the girl to take all she possessed, but not the youth. She tore her hair and beat her breast and threatened dire vengeance upon the girl and her betrothed, but the clanging of Karl's hammer gave Olga courage to repeat her demand: "Give me my Johan in the name of the Christ Child."

At last, the hag, worn out, said harshly: "Get thee home, and at the stroke of midnight on the Jul Afton I will bring thee thy Johan," then with a bitter scream she disappeared, and

do as I bid thee. I have my reasons, my sister; the Skogfrau has been defeated thus far, but she is revengeful, yet I have a plan to end her power over Johan forever. Wilt do as I say, little one?"

"Ja, my brother, though it be to do again as I did to-night."

"It will not be so terrible, my sister, and when thou hast done it thou wilt laugh and rejoice. Now, to bed with thee, to lay up freshness for the morrow. I will watch over the sweet Thilda and bring her to thy arms in the morning."

The Jul Tieden began with its merrymaking and feasting. In one week, on the Jul Afton, the Christmas Eve, the climax would be reached. There was a squealing in the pens, a squalling, cackling and quacking in the coops. Every oven was kept at the

Early Christmas Music.

Both in Germany and in England in olden times the custom prevailed among young choristers of going through the streets in bands early on Christmas morning and singing Christmas hymns and carols for alms before the houses of the rich. A familiar picture is that of Martin Luther when a boy singing in the streets at Christmas dawn. Several of the most familiar German Christmas hymns were harmonized early in the seventeenth century by Jacob Praetorius to melodies composed about the middle of the sixteenth century by Luther. One of the greatest masters of German music, Johann Sebastian Bach, when a pupil at the choir and grammar school at St. Michael's, in Lüneburg, walked the streets early Christmas morning singing these "wails," with his fellow choristers, between whom and those of another school the musical rivalry was so intense that the authorities were obliged to map out separate routes for them in order to prevent their meeting and coming to blows.