

Scrimping on Marriage

By Victoria Benedictsson

Translated from the Swedish by Verne Moberg

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IT WAS ALREADY starting to get a little dark -- the day was overcast -- but the pastor still sat working on his sermon. He was disturbed by noise in the hallway, where scraping and stamping were audible, though muffled and cautious; there was nose blowing and coughing; a hand out there fumbled for the key, and then the door was opened.

Those entering proved to be a man and two women of the class of poor country folk, but it was dim over there by the door, so the pastor couldn't make out the features of their faces. The trio caused a great commotion trying to get through the door, and after they finally managed to get on in and gather in a cluster on the little rug, the fellow coughed and said good evening.

The pastor lit the lamp standing on the table. Afterward he turned around and replied to the greeting.

"Come in," he said. "What is it?"

A lively whispering ensued down by the door, and after a number of little pokes, the fellow stepped closer, taking long strides with his white boots so as to make as few marks as possible on the clean floor. Having come closer to the table, he made a hasty bow which might suggest that his body consisted of two rigid parts with a hinge in between.

"The banns were read for me and Bengta here," he said, gesturing with his hands in the direction of the door, where a faint cough was heard.

"What's *your* name?" asked the pastor, starting to move about among an abundance of papers and books on the big desk.

"Per Larsson at No. 7 Timet," the fellow informed him, stretching out a leg and slapping it a bit with his cap.

"Oh. And the maid Bengta Hansdotter from Hemset?"

"Yes."

"The banns were read for you three weeks ago Sunday."

The pastor closed the book and regarded his guest on whose face the lamplight was just falling; the broad mouth, the small eyes, and the sheepish expression made it not especially attractive.

Holding his chin with his coarse-skinned hand, the fellow answered in a laconic tone: "Yes, but now it seems we've changed our minds some."

With his hand still on his chin, he raised his glance toward the cornice and followed it attentively along one of the long walls, looking as if nothing had seemed as alien to his thoughts as the answer he had given.

"`Changed our minds some,'" repeated the pastor with indignation. "Why in the world would you go out and have the banns read?"

"Well, you see, we had got it into our heads that we should get married," answered the designated bridegroom very calmly, letting his gaze wander slowly down from the cornice to a picture that hung over the writing desk.

"Well," said the minister impatiently.

"Well, let's see, now we wanted to have this thing, so to say, *redone*." He stressed the last word as if he'd thought the minister had trouble understanding and therefore one had to express oneself very clearly.

The pastor had difficulty staying serious; the whole scene appeared so comical.

"Why do you want to have it redone?" he inquired.

"Well, you see, Bengta would so to speak be pleased to stay in service a little longer," the answer sounded, as the speaker bent forward a bit with his hand on the outermost corner of the desk and looked at the minister.

"Couldn't she have figured that out before you had the banns read?" asked the minister, half cross and struggling to hold back his laughter.

"Yes, but see, now Nils Tuassen has become a widower," recounted the groom in a confiding voice, "and so he knows that Bengta is faithful, and so he's promised her free room and board and two sheep born and a bushel of 'taters set and flax sown, and then she can do her own work; so a person can't complain about that?"

"Well, but that was too bad for you, that you should lose your wife on that account," said the minister, holding his laughter back by necessity."

"Yes, but I'd got the notion -- that Ingar and I should have the banns read instead." He gestured again in the direction of the door, and once again a polite cough was heard.

"Oh. Is Ingar with too?" asked the pastor, visibly interested.

"Yes. Step in here, Ingar."

The chairman of the trio waved his hand; he felt in complete mastery of the situation.

Ingar blew her nose in her folded-up handkerchief adjusted the scarf around her head and with cautious steps walked forward to the desk. She was quite young and didn't look bad. Of course, she seemed somewhat puzzled but fixed a pair of trusting eyes on the pastor. There was something so basically wholesome about her -- an uncultivated field with lovely wild flowers among thistle and sedge.

The pastor was gripped with compassion.

"So you're the one who wants to marry Per Larsson?" he said, and his voice had taken on a different tone, at once subdued and depressed.

The girl looked down, her glove-clad fingers rolled her handkerchief, but she did not answer.

"I'll tell you, Pastor, we were in service together yesterday," Per Larsson informed him, looking at the girl with something resembling benevolence. "And people have told me wherever I went that I was no slouch, and the hard stuff never enters my mouth."

"Yes, but if you don't keep track of your marital affairs any better than this, I think it would be better to live unmarried for the meantime, and postpone both the reading of the banns and the wedding till your fancy has had time to settle a bit."

"Yes, but I've taken a little farm for the future," objected Per, "and now it's absolutely impossible for me to be both outside and inside, so I have to have *some* woman."

"But let me tell you one thing, Per Larsson," said the pastor, with a tone of rage in his voice. "And that is that you don't go and have the banns read until you yourself know what you want; for a man who has announced his betrothal to one woman in the presence of the whole congregation can't marry a different one just like that."

"A threat's not a fine," objected Per Larsson, "and when you haven't got together yet, they must be able to redo it, I reckon."

"They can, but then you have to go to the cathedral office with an application to get legally separated. Up till then you're attached."

Per Larsson cast an imploring look toward the door.

"Does it cost anything?" he asked hesitantly.

"I can't say for certain, but all in all it could come to about ten crowns."

The proposed bridegroom looked uncertain, as he hadn't been prepared for this eventuality.

"I'll have to hear what Bengta says," he stated and stepped back. Now followed whispering deliberation over by the door, from which the pastor nonetheless comprehended that Per was trying to talk Bengta into defraying the expenses, but she refused to do so.

Finally Per Larsson stepped up to the desk again, followed by Bengta.

She might be forty years old or so, was well dressed and adorned with silver clasps on her scarf, but her face was rough, and she had lost some teeth.

"We think ten crowns is pretty steep, so we'd rather get married," said Per Larsson, speaking on both his own behalf and Bengta's.

Ingar quietly withdrew, when she saw what a turn the matter was taking. On her rosy face neither joy nor regret appeared: she had grown accustomed to taking one day at a time.

But the pastor was seething with exasperation. He was still young and got upset by this way of dealing with marital matters. After a long look at both of the parties, he burst out indignantly: "Have you lost your senses?" Are ten crowns going to determine your marriage -- your whole life!"

He might just as well have tried to make an impression on the wall as on these two mammoth thralls.

"Since we can't do better than ten crowns, then it can stay the way it is," said Bengta, and fastened her scarf beneath her chin. "What time could we come to get married on Friday?"

"Three o'clock," replied the minister, closing the book on the desk so the ruler jumped.

"Well, many thanks to you, Pastor, and good night," said the bridegroom, bowing.

But the pastor did not reply.

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