

# **Tales From Two Hemispheres**

**by**

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## The Man Who Lost His Name

ON the second day of June, 186--, a young Norseman, Halfdan Bjerk by name, landed on the pier at Castle Garden. He passed through the straight and narrow gate where he was asked his name, birthplace, and how much money he had,-- at which he grew very much frightened.

"And your destination?"--demanded the gruff-looking functionary at the desk.

"America," said the youth, and touched his hat politely.

"Do you think I have time for joking?" roared the official, with an oath.

The Norseman ran his hand through his hair, smiled his timidly conciliatory smile, and tried his best to look brave; but his hand trembled and his heart thumped away at an alarmingly quickened tempo.

"Put him down for Nebraska!" cried a stout red-cheeked individual (inwrapped in the mingled fumes of tobacco and whisky) whose function it was to open and shut the gate.

"There aint many as go to Nebraska."

"All right, Nebraska."

The gate swung open and the pressure from behind urged the timid traveler on, while an extra push from the gate-keeper sent him flying in the direction of a board fence, where he sat down and tried to realize that he was now in the land of liberty.

Halfdan Bjerk was a tall, slender-limbed youth of very delicate frame; he had a pair of wonderfully candid, unreflecting blue eyes, a smooth, clear, beardless face, and soft, wavy light hair, which was pushed back from his forehead without parting. His mouth and chin were well cut, but their lines were, perhaps, rather weak for a man. When in repose, the ensemble of his features was exceedingly pleasing and somehow reminded one of Correggio's St. John. He had left his native land because he was an ardent republican and was abstractly convinced that man, generically and individually, lives more happily in a republic than in a monarchy. He had anticipated with keen pleasure the large, freely breathing life he was to lead in a land where every man was his neighbor's brother, where no senseless traditions kept a jealous watch over obsolete systems and shrines, and no chilling prejudice blighted the spontaneous blossoming of the soul.

Halfdan was an only child. His father, a poor government official, had died during his infancy, and his mother had given music lessons, and kept boarders, in order to gain the means to give her son what is called a learned education. In the Latin school Halfdan had enjoyed the reputation of being a bright youth, and at the age of eighteen, he had entered the university under the most promising auspices. He could make very fair verses, and play all imaginable instruments with equal ease, which made him a favorite in society. Moreover, he possessed that very old-fashioned accomplishment of cutting silhouettes; and what was more, he could draw the most charmingly fantastic arabesques for embroidery patterns, and he even dabbled in portrait and landscape painting. Whatever he turned his hand to, he did well, in fact, astonishingly well for a dilettante, and yet not well enough to claim the title of an artist. Nor did it ever occur to him to make such a claim. As one of his fellow-students remarked in a fit of jealousy, "Once when

Nature had made three geniuses, a poet, a musician, and a painter, she took all the remaining odds and ends and shook them together at random and the result was Halfdan Bjerk." This agreeable melange of accomplishments, however, proved very attractive to the ladies, who invited the possessor to innumerable afternoon tea-parties, where they drew heavy drafts on his unflagging patience, and kept him steadily engaged with patterns and designs for embroidery, leather flowers, and other dainty knickknacks. And in return for all his exertions they called him "sweet" and "beautiful," and applied to him many other enthusiastic adjectives seldom heard in connection with masculine names. In the university, talents of this order gained but slight recognition, and when Halfdan had for three years been preparing himself in vain for the examen philosophicum, he found himself slowly and imperceptibly drifting into the ranks of the so-called studiosi perpetui, who preserve a solemn silence at the examination tables, fraternize with every new generation of freshmen, and at last become part of the fixed furniture of their Alma Mater. In the larger American colleges, such men are mercilessly dropped or sent to a Divinity School; but the European universities, whose tempers the centuries have mellowed, harbor in their spacious Gothic bosoms a tenderer heart for their unfortunate sons. There the professors greet them at the green tables with a good-humored smile of recognition; they are treated with gentle forbearance, and are allowed to linger on, until they die or become tutors in the families of remote clergymen, where they invariably fall in love with the handsomest daughter, and thus lounge into a modest prosperity.

If this had been the fate of our friend Bjerk, we should have dismissed him here with a confident "vale" on his life's pilgrimage. But, unfortunately, Bjerk was inclined to hold the government in some way responsible for his own poor success as a student, and this, in connection with an aesthetic enthusiasm for ancient Greece, gradually convinced him that the republic was the only form of government under which men of his tastes and temperament were apt to flourish. It was, like everything that pertained to him, a cheerful, genial conviction, without the slightest tinge of bitterness. The old institutions were obsolete, rotten to the core, he said, and needed a radical renovation. He could sit for hours of an evening in the Students' Union, and discourse over a glass of mild toddy, on the benefits of universal suffrage and trial by jury, while the picturesqueness of his language, his genial sarcasms, or occasional witty allusions would call forth uproarious applause from throngs of admiring freshmen. These were the sunny days in Halfdan's career, days long to be remembered. They came to an abrupt end when old Mrs. Bjerk died, leaving nothing behind her but her furniture and some trifling debts. The son, who was not an eminently practical man, underwent long hours of misery in trying to settle up her affairs, and finally in a moment of extreme dejection sold his entire inheritance in a lump to a pawnbroker (reserving for himself a few rings and trinkets) for the modest sum of 250 dollars specie. He then took formal leave of the Students' Union in a brilliant speech, in which he traced the parallelisms between the lives of Pericles and Washington,--in his opinion the two greatest men the world had ever seen,--expounded his theory of democratic government, and explained the causes of the rapid rise of the American Republic. The next morning he exchanged half of his worldly

possessions for a ticket to New York, and within a few days set sail for the land of promise, in the far West.

II.

From Castle Garden, Halfdan made his way up through Greenwich street, pursued by a clamorous troop of confidence men and hotel runners.

"Kommen Sie mit mir. Ich bin auch Deutsch," cried one. "Voila, voila, je parle Francais," shouted another, seizing hold of his valise. "Jeg er Dansk. Tale Dansk,"[1] roared a third, with an accent which seriously impeached his truthfulness. In order to escape from these importunate rascals, who were every moment getting bolder, he threw himself into the first street-car which happened to pass; he sat down, gazed out of the windows and soon became so thoroughly absorbed in the animated scenes which moved as in a panorama before his eyes, that he quite forgot where he was going. The conductor called for fares, and received an English shilling, which, after some ineffectual expostulation, he pocketed, but gave no change. At last after about an hour's journey, the car stopped, the conductor called out "Central Park," and Halfdan woke up with a start. He dismounted with a timid, deliberate step, stared in dim bewilderment at the long rows of palatial residences, and a chill sense of loneliness crept over him. The hopeless strangeness of everything he saw, instead of filling him with rapture as he had once anticipated, sent a cold shiver to his heart. It is a very large affair, this world of ours--a good deal larger than it appeared to him gazing out upon it from his snug little corner up under the Pole; and it was as unsympathetic as it was large; he suddenly felt what he had never been aware of before-- that he was a very small part of it and of very little account after all. He staggered over to a bench at the entrance to the park, and sat long watching the fine carriages as they dashed past him; he saw the handsome women in brilliant costumes laughing and chatting gayly; the apathetic policemen promenading in stoic dignity up and down upon the smooth pavements; the jauntily attired nurses, whom in his Norse innocence he took for mothers or aunts of the children, wheeling baby-carriages which to Norse eyes seemed miracles of dainty ingenuity, under the shady crowns of the elm-trees. He did not know how long he had been sitting there, when a little bright-eyed girl with light kid gloves, a small blue parasol and a blue polonaise, quite a lady of fashion en miniature, stopped in front of him and stared at him in shy wonder. He had always been fond of children, and often rejoiced in their affectionate ways and confidential prattle, and now it suddenly touched him with a warm sense of human fellowship to have this little daintily befrilled and crisply starched beauty single him out for notice among the hundreds who reclined in the arbors, or sauntered to and fro under the great trees.

[1] "I am a Dane. I speak Danish."

"What is your name, my little girl?" he asked, in a tone of friendly interest.

"Clara," answered the child, hesitatingly; then, having by another look assured herself of his harmlessness, she added: "How very funny you speak!"

"Yes," he said, stooping down to take her tiny begloved hand. "I do not speak as well as you do, yet; but I shall soon learn."

Clara looked puzzled.

"How old are you?" she asked, raising her parasol, and throwing back her head with an air of superiority.

"I am twenty-four years old."

She began to count half aloud on her fingers: "One, two, three, four," but, before she reached twenty, she lost her patience.

"Twenty-four," she exclaimed, "that is a great deal. I am only seven, and papa gave me a pony on my birthday. Have you got a pony?"

"No; I have nothing but what is in this valise, and you know I could not very well get a pony into it."

Clara glanced curiously at the valise and laughed; then suddenly she grew serious again, put her hand into her pocket and seemed to be searching eagerly for something. Presently she hauled out a small porcelain doll's head, then a red-painted block with letters on it, and at last a penny.

"Do you want them?" she said, reaching him her treasures in both hands. "You may have them all."

Before he had time to answer, a shrill, penetrating voice cried out:

"Why, gracious! child, what are you doing ? "

And the nurse, who had been deeply absorbed in "The New York Ledger," came rushing up, snatched the child away, and retreated as hastily as she had come.

Halfdan rose and wandered for hours aimlessly along the intertwining roads and footpaths. He visited the menageries, admired the statues, took a very light dinner, consisting of coffee, sandwiches, and ice, at the Chinese Pavilion, and, toward evening, discovered an inviting leafy arbor, where he could withdraw into the privacy of his own thoughts, and ponder upon the still unsolved problem of his destiny. The little incident with the child had taken the edge off his unhappiness and turned him into a more conciliatory mood toward himself and the great pitiless world, which seemed to take so little notice of him. And he, who had come here with so warm a heart and so ardent a will to join in the great work of human advancement--to find himself thus harshly ignored and buffeted about, as if he were a hostile intruder! Before him lay the huge unknown city where human life pulsed with large, full heart-throbs, where a breathless, weird intensity, a cold, fierce passion seemed to be hurrying everything onward in a maddening whirl, where a gentle, warm-blooded enthusiast like himself had no place and could expect naught but a speedy destruction.

A strange, unconquerable dread took possession of him, as if he had been caught in a swift, strong whirlpool, from which he vainly struggled to escape. He crouched down among the foliage and shuddered. He could not return to the city. No, no: he never would return. He would remain here hidden and unseen until morning, and then he would seek a vessel bound for his dear native land, where the great mountains loomed up in serene majesty toward the blue sky, where the pine-forests whispered their dreamily sympathetic legends, in the long summer twilights, where human existence flowed on in calm beauty with the modest aims, small virtues, and small vices which were the happiness of modest, idyllic souls. He even saw himself in spirit recounting to his astonished countrymen the wonderful things he had heard and seen during his foreign pilgrimage, and smiled to himself as he imagined their wonder when he should tell them about

the beautiful little girl who had been the first and only one to offer him a friendly greeting in the strange land. During these reflections he fell asleep, and slept soundly for two or three hours. Once, he seemed to hear footsteps and whispers among the trees, and made an effort to rouse himself, but weariness again overmastered him and he slept on. At last, he felt himself seized violently by the shoulders, and a gruff voice shouted in his ear:

"Get up, you sleepy dog."

He rubbed his eyes, and, by the dim light of the moon, saw a Herculean policeman lifting a stout stick over his head. His former terror came upon him with increased violence, and his heart stood for a moment still, then, again, hammered away as if it would burst his sides.

"Come along!" roared the policeman, shaking him vehemently by the collar of his coat.

In his bewilderment he quite forgot where he was, and, in hurried Norse sentences, assured his persecutor that he was a harmless, honest traveler, and implored him to release him. But the official Hercules was inexorable.

"My valise, my valise;" cried Halfdan. "Pray let me get my valise."

They returned to the place where he had slept, but the valise was nowhere to be found. Then, with dumb despair he resigned himself to his fate, and after a brief ride on a street-car, found himself standing in a large, low-ceiled room; he covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

"The grand-the happy republic," he murmured, "spontaneous blossoming of the soul. Alas! I have rooted up my life; I fear it will never blossom."

All the high-flown adjectives he had employed in his parting speech in the Students' Union, when he paid his enthusiastic tribute to the Grand Republic, now kept recurring to him, and in this moment the paradox seemed cruel. The Grand Republic, what did it care for such as he? A pair of brawny arms fit to wield the pick-axe and to steer the plow it received with an eager welcome; for a child-like, loving heart and a generously fantastic brain, it had but the stern greeting of the law.

III.

The next morning, Halfdan was released from the Police Station, having first been fined five dollars for vagrancy. All his money, with the exception of a few pounds which he had exchanged in Liverpool, he had lost with his valise, and he had to his knowledge not a single acquaintance in the city or on the whole continent. In order to increase his capital he bought some fifty "Tribunes," but, as it was already late in the day, he hardly succeeded in selling a single copy. The next morning, he once more stationed himself on the corner of Murray street and Broadway, hoping in his innocence to dispose of the papers he had still on hand from the previous day, and actually did find a few customers among the people who were jumping in and out of the omnibuses that passed up and down the great thoroughfare. To his surprise, however, one of these gentlemen returned to him with a very wrathful countenance, shook his fist at him, and vociferated with excited gestures something which to Halfdan's ears had a very unintelligible sound. He made a vain effort to defend himself; the situation appeared so utterly incomprehensible to him, and in his dumb helplessness he looked pitiful enough

to move the heart of a stone. No English phrase suggested itself to him, only a few Norse interjections rose to his lips. The man's anger suddenly abated; he picked up the paper which he had thrown on the sidewalk, and stood for a while regarding Halfdan curiously.

"Are you a Norwegian?" he asked.

"Yes, I came from Norway yesterday."

"What's your name?"

"Halfdan Bjerk."

"Halfdan Bjerk! My stars! Who would have thought of meeting you here! You do not recognize me, I suppose."

Halfdan declared with a timid tremor in his voice that he could not at the moment recall his features.

"No, I imagine I must have changed a good deal since you saw me," said the man, suddenly dropping into Norwegian. "I am Gustav Olson, I used to live in the same house with you once, but that is long ago now."

Gustav Olson--to be sure, he was the porter's son in the house, where his mother had once during his childhood, taken a flat. He well remembered having clandestinely traded jack-knives and buttons with him, in spite of the frequent warnings he had received to have nothing to do with him; for Gustav, with his broad freckled face and red hair, was looked upon by the genteel inhabitants of the upper flats as rather a disreputable character. He had once whipped the son of a colonel who had been impudent to him, and thrown a snow-ball at the head of a new-fledged lieutenant, which offenses he had duly expiated at a house of correction. Since that time he had vanished from Halfdan's horizon. He had still the same broad freckled face, now covered with a lusty growth of coarse red beard, the same rebellious head of hair, which refused to yield to the subduing influences of the comb, the same plebeian hands and feet, and uncouth clumsiness of form. But his linen was irreproachable, and a certain dash in his manner, and the loud fashionableness of his attire, gave unmistakable evidences of prosperity.

"Come, Bjerk," said he in a tone of good-fellowship, which was not without its sting to the idealistic republican, "you must take up a better business than selling yesterday's `Tribune.' That won't pay here, you know. Come along to our office and I will see if something can't be done for you."

"But I should be sorry to give you trouble," stammered Halfdan, whose native pride, even in his present wretchedness, protested against accepting a favor from one whom he had been wont to regard as his inferior.

"Nonsense, my boy. Hurry up, I haven't much time to spare. The office is only two blocks from here. You don't look as if you could afford to throw away a friendly offer."

The last words suddenly roused Halfdan from his apathy; for he felt that they were true. A drowning man cannot afford to make nice distinctions--cannot afford to ask whether the helping hand that is extended to him be that of an equal or an inferior. So he swallowed his humiliation and threaded his way through the bewildering turmoil of Broadway, by the side of his officious friend.



They entered a large, elegantly furnished office, where clerks with sleek and severely apathetic countenances stood scribbling at their desks.

"You will have to amuse yourself as best you can," said Olson. "Mr. Van Kirk will be here in twenty minutes. I haven't time to entertain you."

A dreary half hour passed. Then the door opened and a tall, handsome man, with a full grayish beard, and a commanding presence, entered and took his seat at a desk in a smaller adjoining office. He opened, with great dispatch, a pile of letters which lay on the desk before him, called out in a sharp, ringing tone for a clerk, who promptly appeared, handed him half-a-dozen letters, accompanying each with a brief direction, took some clean paper from a drawer and fell to writing. There was something brisk, determined, and business-like in his manner, which made it seem very hopeless to Halfdan to appear before him as a petitioner. Presently Olson entered the private office, closing the door behind him, and a few minutes later re-appeared and summoned Halfdan into the chief's presence.

"You are a Norwegian, I hear," said the merchant, looking around over his shoulder at the supplicant, with a preoccupied air. "You want work. What can you do?"

What can you do? A fatal question. But here was clearly no opportunity for mental debate. So, summoning all his courage, but feeling nevertheless very faint, he answered:

"I have passed both examen artium and philosophicum,[2] and got my laud clear in the former, but in the latter haud on the first point."

[2] Examen artium is the entrance examination to the Norwegian University, and philosophicum the first degree. The ranks given at these are Laudabilis prae ceteris (in student's parlance, prae), laudabilis or laud, haud illaudabilis, or haud, etc.

Mr. Van Kirk wheeled round on his chair and faced the speaker:

"That is all Greek to me," he said, in a severe tone. "Can you keep accounts?"

"No. I am afraid not."

Keeping accounts was not deemed a classical accomplishment in Norway. It was only "trade-rats" who troubled themselves about such gross things, and if our Norseman had not been too absorbed with the problem of his destiny, he would have been justly indignant at having such a question put to him.

"Then you don't know book-keeping?"

"I think not. I never tried it."

"Then you may be sure you don't know it. But you must certainly have tried your hand at something. Is there nothing you can think of which might help you to get a living?"

"I can play the piano--and--and the violin."

"Very well, then. You may come this afternoon to my house. Mr. Olson will tell you the address. I will give you a note to Mrs. Van Kirk. Perhaps she will engage you as a music teacher for the children. Good morning."

IV.

At half-past four o'clock in the afternoon, Halfdan found himself standing in a large, dimly lighted drawing-room, whose brilliant upholstery, luxurious carpets, and fantastically twisted furniture dazzled and bewildered his senses. All was so

strange, so strange; nowhere a familiar object to give rest to the wearied eye. Wherever he looked he saw his shabbily attired figure repeated in the long crystal mirrors, and he became uncomfortably conscious of his threadbare coat, his uncouth boots, and the general incongruity of his appearance. With every moment his uneasiness grew; and he was vaguely considering the propriety of a precipitate flight, when the rustle of a dress at the farther end of the room startled him, and a small, plump lady, of a daintily exquisite form, swept up toward him, gave a slight inclination of her head, and sank down into an easy-chair:

"You are Mr. ----, the Norwegian, who wishes to give music lessons?" she said, holding a pair of gold-framed eyeglasses up to her eyes, and running over the note which she held in her hand. It read as follows:

DEAR MARTHA,--The bearer of this note is a young Norwegian, I forgot to ascertain his name, a friend of Olson's. He wishes to teach music. If you can help the poor devil and give him something to do, you will oblige,

Yours,

H. V. K.

Mrs. Van Kirk was evidently, by at least twelve years, her husband's junior, and apparently not very far advanced in the forties. Her blonde hair, which was freshly crimped, fell lightly over her smooth, narrow forehead; her nose, mouth and chin had a neat distinctness of outline; her complexion was either naturally or artificially perfect, and her eyes, which were of the purest blue, had, owing to their near-sightedness, a certain pinched and scrutinizing look. This look, which was without the slightest touch of severity, indicating merely a lively degree of interest, was further emphasized by three small perpendicular wrinkles, which deepened and again relaxed according to the varying intensity of observation she bestowed upon the object which for the time engaged her attention.

"Your name, if you please?" said Mrs. Van Kirk, having for awhile measured her visitor with a glance of mild scrutiny.

"Halfdan Bjerk."

"Half-dan B----, how do you spell that?"

"B-j-e-r-k."

"B-jerk. Well, but I mean, what is your name in English?"

Halfdan looked blank, and blushed to his ears.

"I wish to know," continued the lady energetically, evidently anxious to help him out, "what your name would mean in plain English. Bjerk, it certainly must mean something."

"Bjerk is a tree--a birch-tree."

"Very well, Birch,--that is a very respectable name. And your first name? What did you say that was?"

"H-a-l-f-d-a-n."

"Half Dan. Why not a whole Dan and be done with it? Dan Birch, or rather Daniel Birch. Indeed, that sounds quite Christian."

"As you please, madam," faltered the victim,; looking very unhappy.

"You will pardon my straightforwardness, won't you? B-jerk. I could never pronounce that, you know."

"Whatever may be agreeable to you, madam, will be sure to please me."

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