

An Unfinished Story¹
By Isabel Piper Olson

The little woman's face glowed with pleasure as she took my 16 month old baby from my arms and sat down on the kitchen rocker to better examine her. No wonder! Small Helen "beamed" at everyone, showing her eight beautiful new teeth and deep dimples. Her eyes twinkled as she captivated her new audience.

The wrinkled gnome like face of the woman glistened with a tear or two as she exclaimed, "She has Karen's dimples -- Oh the darling -- she looks just like Karen did when she came from old country!"

I smiled at Albertina in whose arms my little one rested. That my beautiful child looked "just like Karen" was hard to believe.

Karen was my late mother-in-law -- a strong, forceful woman who ruled her family indisputably either by command, threat or any means, including dishonesty.

Yet my memory of her was that of a wrinkled half-invalid who had rapidly lost about 100 lb. and had a wrinkle to show for every one of them. She had once had teeth and later ill-fitting dentures which she wore only on special occasions and always removed when she ate. Yet her eyes could be merry and she was great to "make a joke," so Albertina could be right. Albertina had been her best friend and she should know. Albertina was talking and I had better listen.

"Karen was not only beautiful," she said, "she had a way with people -- All the girls wanted her to be their best friend and all the men wanted to marry her -- all except Alex."

It was the spring festival. The village square at Drammen was all cleared ready for the dancing. All the lamp posts bore Norwegian flags and bunting. Booths were set up for dispensing beer and pastries. The village women had been busy for weeks turning out Berliner Kransen, Baakkles, Krum Kochen and endless other delicacies. The Bands from surrounding villages were beginning to arrive, each decked out in proper regalia. Here and there a Trespel wined out a rhythm that made everyone's toes begin to tingle.

Karen stood in front of the steps of her rooming house. This festival would be different -- no merriment for her here -- For one thing she could not dance alone, could she? She was new on this job and five miles from home! If any of her neighbors came it would be the older ones and she was only fourteen. Then, Frederick, her beloved (only he didn't know it) was gravely ill in an Oslo hospital. If she danced at this festival who knows, she might well be dancing on his grave. But her toes began to move just a little as the trumpets, the drums and the bassoons began follow the lead of the Trespels.

¹ My mother, Isabel Piper Olson, always talked of trying to write the story of her mother-in-law, Karen Hermanson Olson. After mother died, I found a few pages of this unfinished story in her desk. It inspired me in the summer of 1973 to attempt to set down what I knew about my father's family. That piece remains unfinished and is not in this first family publication, but this little story of mother's spurs us to try to capture our past.

In typing this from a blurry hand-written copy, I occasionally came across words I couldn't read. I have no idea what a "Trespel" was or what the next word said. H. Olson

The streets began to fill with giggling girls, eyes rolling in the direction of the little knots of men clustered about the now busy beer booths. Not a man here under 20, Karen thought -- who knows, some of those look 25. She retreated into the doorway.

The benches around the square began to fill with townspeople hurrying now to get the best seats -- old men smoking great crooked pipes or chewing "snuuce," Women in their Sunday black watching eager faced little ones. The door behind Karen opened and her employer frowned a little --

"Karen, you have the day off -- don't just stand here!"

"I can watch from here."

"Don't just watch -- get into the fun -- next thing you'll be married and have to sit on the benches -- dance while you can!"

Rather than argue, Karen slowly descended the steps and moved toward the booths at the other end of the square. A voice at her elbow startled her -- Hans the carriage boy.

"Come on Karen -- let's dance."

Trapped, Karen looked around for an excuse but found none. Hans grabbed her hands and they were off at a gallop. Karen's keen sense of rhythm made her feet skip to the music but poor Hans had no knowledge of rhythm nor did he care. He leaped from one foot to the other with giant steps swinging poor Karen off her feet on the corners. Breathless and re-faced they plowed through the crowds and when the music finally stopped they were on the edge of the beer booth crowd. Raucous laughter greeted Hans.

"Ha! who is the pretty peasant? Have a beer Hans -- let me have the bumpkin!"

Karen's cheeks flamed as she drew back from the coarse hulk of a man who reached for her. The music started again and the man grabbed her roughly --

"What's this? Too good for old Knut -- aw, they don't make 'em too good for Knut, Honey."

Karen looked wildly about but felt herself being forced into the dancing crowd. But at least this old man knew the dance steps and rhythm seemed a part of him. Silently she allowed herself to be led and the dance was almost fun until the music stopped.

"What's your name, kitten?"

"Karen."

"What -- Karen What?"

"Hermanson to Baak."

"You don't live in Drammen, do you?"

"Yes -- no --"

"Ha ha you funny kitten -- 'Yes! No!'"

"I came from Leer two weeks ago to work for Tora Sortland in the dairy -"

"Oh -- one of Tora's girls, huh?"

She heard the music start again and Knut seized her hands --

"Come on, Kitten."

The end of this set found them near the Beer Booths again. Knut ordered two mugs, carefully not releasing her hand while he reached in his pocket. Drinking his with great draughts he said,

"Drink up, Kitten. There's the music again."

"No -- I don't drink --"

"Aw that was yesterday -- you're a woman of the world now -- one of Tora's girls --Drink up!"

His livid face was close to hers now -- he seized the mug and forced it to her lips. If she could only tell this yokel that this was no idea for fun as far as she was concerned.

"Drink -- you little vixen -- want to stay a child all your life?"

"Yes -- yes" -- the words were almost a sob.

"Very well," Knut quaffed the second mug in less time than the first. "Guess you better find your way home!" He was gone in the crowd.

A moment of panic seized Karen -- who in this milling crowd did she know and could trust? Her eyes caught a slightly familiar figure leaning on the improvised bar-- Could it be Alex Erickson, one of the older young men from Leer? Couldn't be -- he left for America months ago but surely it did look like him. The head turned and eyes caught hers and twinkled briefly but turned back to the bar.

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