



More Than a Dream

by Lauraine Snelling

Excerpt provided courtesy of LauraineSnelling.com

July 23, 1895

Dear Thorliff,

Thank you for your letter. I am too busy to be homesick until I get a letter from home, and then I read with tears in my eyes for wanting to see dear faces. I haven't played a piano for so long that I am afraid my fingers will no longer remember the right keys. But I cannot begin to tell you of all the things I am learning. I assist in surgery almost on a daily basis, depending on what our schedule is. With the heat and humidity of summer, many of our surgeries are to repair the aftermath of fights. What with the drinking of spirits here, which is prevalent, and the hot tempers due to overcrowding and deplorable living conditions, I sometimes wonder if God has turned his eye away from this part of the world and said, "Do your worst and pay the penalty."

So many babies and little children die that it is no wonder the wives are in a family way most of the time. But oh, the heartbreak.

I tried to save two little boys sick with typhoid fever, and Dr. Morganstein reprimanded me rather severely because they were so contagious we could have lost many of our other patients, but they both died within hours of each other. I think the mother wanted to stay with us for the privilege of clean water, a little quiet, and a clean bed. But her husband insisted she return home, no doubt to breed another. I had to scrub and disinfect the room, as well as the bed, afterward. But I would do it again if I could, or rather if I were in charge. But Dr. Morganstein is right, and I must get tougher.

My time here is slipping by so quickly. Two more weeks and Mother will arrive. Oh, did Father tell you that Dr. Morganstein is planning to start a medical school in the building next to the hospital? She purchased the three-story building not long ago and says she will start having classes in October. She plans to start with ten students and has a room that will be used for the laboratory where cadavers will be available for dissection. I know that sounds macabre, but as you well know from my ranting on about the need to learn the human body from more than drawings in textbooks, I am excited. I have already written to both of the other schools to decline admission there. So I will spend the next two years in Chicago instead of Minneapolis, with no breaks for summer or holidays. Hospitals run both day and night, as I have well learned. Dr. Morganstein says that I am far ahead of most beginning medical students, and she has already given me every opportunity to learn all that I can.

Are your mother and Astrid coming to Northfield in August as they hoped? I am so looking forward to meeting them. When I return I am planning to sleep for three days straight or perhaps a week.

Another little thing: a man here is accusing Dr. Morganstein and me of killing his wife because we did a Cesarian on her to try and save the baby. Oh, a Cesarian is when the baby is removed via an abdominal incision. The police have been here, and we are exonerated, but Ian Flannery will not leave it or us alone. On one hand I feel sorry for him, but not much, because she died after he pushed her down the stairs in a drunken rage. My heart breaks for his two little children.

I am praying he will stop his attacks on us—so far they are only verbal. I really don't trust him. I shall be glad to leave that situation behind. Please don't mention this to Mother or Father, as I don't want to worry them, but I needed to tell someone.

Your friend,

Elizabeth

PS: How is your croquet game coming?

Thorliff reread the part about the angry drunken man. The urge to go there and make sure she was safe almost lifted him from his chair on the front porch of Mr. Stromme's house. "Bad news?" Henry still spoke slowly and sometimes forgot what he was going to say, but he communicated far better than Dr. Gaskin had ever thought he would. The good doctor had told Thorliff that one evening, claiming it was due to Thorliff's good nursing. Of course, that same evening he'd been giving Thorliff a bad time about Mrs. Kingsley, who managed to show up wherever Thorliff was. At church, at the newspaper office, at the front porch right where he'd been sitting talking with Henry and the doctor. She always had some excuse to be walking by, like needing his expertise with her writing or wanting to introduce him to someone she felt he should meet. He wished she would leave him alone. After all, she was a married woman.

Even at night she haunted him. He'd prayed so often for God to help him keep pure thoughts, he was sure he'd passed the seventy times mark.

"Ja, no. Well, not so much bad news as not really good news. You know what I mean?"

The old man chuckled, ending on a snort. "Not really."

Thorliff changed the subject. "How's your checker tournament going?"

"Takes me longer to play, and sometimes I miss a good move. Never did used to make mistakes like that. Orville is ahead by two games. Pete is one behind me, and John accuses us all of cheating." His pauses between words were becoming shorter.

“Did you walk down to the corner today?”

“I walked to the corner and back twice.” Henry held up two fingers. “Takes me a month of Sundays, but I make it. I been—” he wrinkled his entire face in thought—“c-craving a strawberry soda in the worst way.”

“Mrs. Sitze’s is pretty far away for walking. How about I borrow a buggy and take you down there?”

“I used to walk that in ten minutes, or less if I was in a hurry.” Henry sighed. “But Pastor ... he reminded me today to be grateful for walking slow when I coulda been stuck in a chair or bed for ... for the rest of my life.” He shook his head as he spoke. “Don’t know if I coulda stood that.”

Visions of Joseph Baard in such terrible pain for so long made Thorliff clear his throat. “I had a friend once who was bedridden like that after he fell out of the haymow. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I think you are doing real well.”

“But not so well you can move out yet, you know.”

Thorliff folded Elizabeth’s letter and stuck it back in his pocket. “Can I get you anything?”

“The checkerboard.”

“You sure you wouldn’t rather have dominoes?”

“One of each?” His sly cackle followed Thorliff into the house.

“Hey, you want some of this lemon meringue pie? Not that there is a whole lot left.”

“Sure.” He made a cutting motion. “For us both. Mavis will bake another one tomorrow if I ask her to.”

Thorliff returned, carrying the domino case under his arm and a plate of pie in each hand.

“She the one who cleaned up the kitchen too?”

“Nope. I did that.”

“Really?” I could move back to the newspaper if I had to, Thorliff thought, but that will seem mighty lonely again. Of course it wouldn’t matter when school started. He’d have no time to think about being lonely then anyway.

* * *

Later that night Thorliff's thoughts went back to Elizabeth's letter. So do I tell her parents or not? The thought threatened to turn into a worry. Thorliff lay on his bed, arms locked behind his head. But Elizabeth had confided in him as a friend.

He'd barely fallen asleep, it seemed, when the bells clanged for the fire department. Thorliff bailed out of bed and back into his clothes with the speed of any fireman. He slid down the banister and out the door.

"Go get 'em," yelled Mr. Stromme.

Thorliff jumped on the bicycle he kept propped against the front porch and pedaled toward the fire station. If he got there in time, he could ride on the wagon. He sniffed the wind, which was coming from the west. He could tell by the smell from the Creamery out west of town along the river. The smell of smoke overlaid that of sour milk. Grass fire? Hayfields? Please, Lord, let it not be a house or a barn.

The pumper wagon came flying toward him, pulled by six heavy horses. He angled off the road to keep from getting run over and turned to follow them. While there was no way to keep up, the sound of the clanging bell that warned everyone out of the way beckoned him on. He could see the firelight and billowing smoke long before he got to the fire.

Flames were already licking the walls of the barn by the time they arrived. The firemen had the hose down in the well and were pumping the seesaw-looking handles to get enough pressure to get water spouting out the nozzle and onto the flames. Neighbors had formed bucket lines to both fight the fire and soak down the roofs of the house and the other buildings. When one of the firemen called him over, he took a turn on the pump handle, sweat pouring down his face, his hands slipping on the round metal handle. After what seemed like hours and long enough to make Thorliff sure he was going to drop, the fire chief shouted, the men rotated, and someone shoved him aside to take over the pumping.

Thorliff kept from dropping to his knees through sheer force of a will that felt bent like heated angle iron. He choked back a gag and staggered over to join the bucket brigade. Taking the full bucket from one person and passing it to another seemed a cinch compared to the pumping, until his hands blistered. He could feel them popping on the palms of his hands. Winter hands, his pa would say, soft from lack of heavy labor. While the printing press was no croquet match, compared to this it was a Sunday afternoon stroll.

As the barn collapsed in a shower of flames and sparks, the people doused the roofs again and stood back to keep watch that nothing else ignited.

Thorliff walked around asking questions, learning what he needed to know, then returned to the bicycle he'd leaned against a tree trunk.

Pedaling back to town, he kept coughing from the smoke he'd inhaled while at the same time his mind rehearsed the sentences he would write for his newspaper article. Consensus was that hay put up too wet had heated up and burned down the barn. Thankfully all the animals were outside in the pasture, and though the hay and barn were lost, the house and outbuildings were saved. The volunteer firefighters had done a good job.

"How bad?" Henry asked from his bed.

Thorliff told him and then pulled himself up the stairs. Now he really knew what tired felt like. In those minutes between waking and sleeping he figured out a way he could warn Phillip of the possible danger his daughter was in and not really betray a confidence. He hoped it sounded as good in the morning.

By morning he decided he couldn't tell Phillip. Talk about being caught between a burning fire and a cliff. Which was worse?

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