

Homesteaders Series

A Long Journey
to a New Home

Revised Edition

Book One

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Chapter One

The Letter

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Trygve pulled his hat down and his muffler up in an attempt to keep the cold out. He stopped and waited for his sister to catch up with him. “If you don’t hurry, we’ll be frozen stiff before we get there,” he said.

“I’m coming as fast as I can,” replied Signe. “I don’t like walking to school when it’s so dark.”

“I’m sick of winter and darkness,” complained Trygve. He was only twelve years old, but already he felt as though he had seen too many dark winters in his life.

“I know,” agreed Signe. “It isn’t fair. Oscar’s cousin from Bergen told me they have daylight every day all winter, and up here we have almost three months of steady darkness.”

“Lots of things aren’t fair,” said Trygve. “It’s not fair that Oscar’s family owns the land we live on, and Pa has to give him half of everything he grows, and they’re rich and fat, and we don’t have enough food to make it through the winter.”

“Ma says we’re almost out of wheat,” said Signe.

Trygve nodded. “We’re already out of potatoes. Soon it will be oatmeal and milk, and milk and oatmeal, and oatmeal and milk.”

“And smoked fish,” added Signe.

Trygve sighed. “Yes. Mustn’t forget the fish.”

The two made their way around the last curve in the road that led to the schoolhouse. The small building was silhouetted against a dark gray sky in which pink and green lights flickered and glowed.

“The northern lights are bright today,” remarked Signe.

“It’s like the world is attached to ropes and is swinging from heaven—that is, if there is a heaven,” said Trygve.

Signe gasped. “What do you mean? Of course there’s a heaven!”

“What makes you so sure?” asked Trygve.

“How dare you!” snapped his little sister. “God might strike you dead for talking like that!”

“Talking like what?” asked Oscar Dahl as he came around the corner of the schoolhouse.

“Asking if there’s a heaven,” Trygve told him, pulling his hat off and raising it toward the sky. “Have you ever thought about it? That there very well might not be a heaven or a hell or a God?”

“God might not strike you dead for saying that, but I’m sure Master Sorensen will give it a try,” Oscar joked.

Just then Eric, Jon, and Egil joined them. “What will Master Sorensen try?” asked Egil.

“He’ll give Trygve the switch when he hears that he’s been saying there’s no God,” said Oscar.

“That’s not what I said,” Trygve argued. “Besides, who’s going to tell him?”

“You never know,” said Oscar. “I might.”

Trygve glared at him, but before he could respond, he saw Lars Sorensen, the schoolmaster, come to the doorway of the schoolhouse with the bell in his hand. The light from the lanterns inside pushed back the darkness outside. Oscar stopped and talked to the schoolmaster as he passed through the doorway. Then he looked sideways at Trygve, who stood in the circle of light in front of the school.

Trygve put his coat and his lunch box, which contained two smoked fish, in the cloakroom. Then he went to his desk and slid under it as far as he could.

The students were quiet as Master Sorensen walked to the front of the room and held up a large Bible in his hands. “For this morning’s scripture, we will read from the Fifty-Third Psalm,” he announced.

All of the students stood up for the reading of the scripture. Trygve looked at the window and wished it was springtime so he could see outside. He imagined the pink flowers blooming on the side of the mountain and the cascading waterfalls fed by the melting snow.

The schoolmaster began reading the Psalm. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity...”

Trygve looked at his feet. He felt his neck and ears turn warm.

When Master Sorensen was through reading the Psalm, he closed the Bible and looked at Trygve. “I understand that we have a student who says there’s no God,” he said.

Trygve looked up. “I didn’t say there’s no God,” he insisted. “I said there might not be a God. How can anyone be sure?”

“We can be sure because the Holy Bible says so,” said Master Sorensen sternly.

Trygve wasn’t convinced. “But what about things that aren’t fair?” he asked. “If there’s a God, why do so many people die because they don’t get enough to eat, while others have so much to eat that they get fat?”

Master Sorensen cleared his throat. “I don’t know the answer to your question,” he said, “but I do know that you are committing blasphemy, and that will not go unpunished in my classroom. Go into the cloakroom, and drop your trousers.”

Trygve hung his head and went into the cloakroom while Master Sorensen took the switch from above the door.

“Put your hands up on the shelf,” ordered the schoolmaster.

Trygve hung onto the top shelf while the switch lashed against the backs of his knees. He bit his lip and counted to himself, “...eight, nine, ten, eleven...” Usually when Master Sorensen used the switch, he gave only ten lashes. *He must be very angry*, thought Trygve.

After twenty lashes, Master Sorensen went back into the classroom. Trygve felt the welts rising on the backs of his legs. He pulled up his trousers and went to his desk.

All of the students except for Oscar were looking down at their desks or at the floor. Oscar was looking straight at Trygve with a smug grin on his face.

Trygve sat down gingerly at his desk. Soon the students were caught up in their work. Trygve wrote on his slate, "PLL GET YOU. JUST WAIT." Then he poked Oscar.

Oscar looked at the slate, and Trygve quickly erased his message.

When the school day was done, Trygve and Signe walked up the path that led to the crofter's hut where they lived. The dim light from inside interrupted the darkness of the afternoon.

"You won't tell?" Trygve asked Signe.

"Of course not," she said.

As they entered the cottage, their mother was pouring oatmeal porridge into a large wooden bowl. Trygve didn't like the oatmeal but was glad for it. The dried fish he took in his lunch box never filled the empty hole in his stomach. He and Signe sat on a bench at the table while Ma set the bowl before them. Rolf, who was three years old, quickly got his spoon, climbed up on the bench, and stood between Trygve and Signe, and the three of them shared the bowl of porridge.

"Where's Pa?" asked Trygve.

“He went into the village,” answered Ma. “He should be home soon.”

Before they were through eating, the door opened. Pa came in and took off his fur hat and mittens. Then he took off his scarf and coat and hung them on a hook by the door.

Jon Nels Ytterhorn was as tall as the doorway when he stood up and as narrow as a broomstick—or so it seemed to Trygve. In his hand was a letter. He handed it silently to his wife. Then his eyes rested on Trygve. “Let me see your legs,” he said.

Trygve sighed and stood from the table. He pulled up his pant legs to just above his knees.

“What did you do to deserve that?” asked Pa.

“I said that there might not be a God, and Oscar told on me.”

Pa frowned. “You’ve disgraced the good name of Ytterhorn,” he said as he took off his belt.

“I didn’t mean to,” insisted Trygve. “I only said it to Signe, and big ears Oscar snuck around the corner and heard me.”

Ma watched Pa. “I don’t think Trygve should be punished twice for the same sin,” she intervened.

“He was punished for blasphemy,” said Pa. “I aim to punish him for disgracing our family name.” He looked at his son’s legs for a minute. Red and blue welts ran up and down the boy’s calves to his thighs. Pa relented. “You deserve another whipping, but I think you’ve had enough for one day,” he said. He put his belt back on.

Trygve exhaled and sat back down next to his sister.

“Read the letter out loud,” Pa said to Ma as he sat down at the table across from his children. Trygve and Signe waited quietly. It was only the second letter that had ever come to their family. Rolf, sensing the importance of the occasion, climbed onto Pa’s lap.

Ma took the letter out of its envelope and walked over to the candle by the cupboard. She held the letter up to the candle. The light from the candle outlined her hair and danced in the shadows. She began to read:

To my dear cousin Jon and his wife Gro,

I am writing to try to persuade you and the children to come and join us in America. There are many Norwegians here. Most of them were very poor back in Norway, as we were. Some of them didn’t have enough money for their passage and had to borrow. But all of them have become well-to-do people, as have we. We all have land that belongs to us and have built ourselves good houses.

Everyone here also has cows and pigs and chickens. I myself have four cows, twenty chickens, and eight pigs. This past year’s crop was so plentiful that I had a surplus to sell. I got \$400 for it and am sending you \$50 to help pay for your passage, should you decide to come to America. At first you could stay with us and get work. But in a short time you could afford to buy your own land or go homesteading in the Dakota Territory. That’s where the government is giving away land. You get 160 acres free if you live on it and raise crops. There are many Norwegians beginning to settle there now.

Gunhild and the children send you their love. We are all hoping you will come and join us here in America.

Your Cousin Elmer

“Let’s go!” said Trygve.

But Pa and Ma didn’t say anything. Instead, they sat quietly at the table, thinking. Finally Pa said, “Our situation is so hard here. I wonder if it’s as good in America as Elmer says it is.”

“One hundred and sixty acres!” enthused Trygve. “I bet that’s twice as much land as the Dahls have!”

Signe spoke up. “But if we go across the ocean, we’ll never see Grandma or our aunts and uncles and cousins again.”

Ma spoke next. “If we don’t go, we’ll have to hire out Trygve next summer,” she said. “He’ll have to go to work for the Dahls or the Larsens to help keep us from starving.”

Trygve knew that it was the custom for poor families to hire their children out, but he hated the idea. He thought he would rather die than work for Oscar’s father.

“I think we should go,” said Ma. “There’s no future here for us or our children. We can hardly raise enough to pay the rent and keep us alive through the winter, and with another mouth to feed come summer...” She patted her belly.

Pa stood up. “You’re right,” he said. “But we have a few months to think about it. We can’t travel until spring. Now let’s go feed the goats.” He and Trygve put on their coats and left the house.

When Pa and Trygve had finished milking, Trygve took a small pail of the warm milk and started for the big house. He detested taking the pail of milk every evening, but it was

part of the rent they owed the Dahls, and it was Trygve's job to deliver it.

Even in the dark, he could see the house as he approached. It was large and painted shiny white with red shutters. It stood in sharp contrast to the weathered gray crofter's hut that he lived in. Every time Trygve saw it, he felt the unfairness of the world around him. Many lanterns were lit in the house, and light streamed through the windows upstairs and down, lighting the path as Trygve approached.

Trygve knocked on the door, and Oscar's mother opened it. "Good evening," said Trygve.

Mrs. Dahl took the pail from him and closed the door without a word.

As Trygve turned to leave, Oscar jumped out from the barn. "And how is the little milk boy?" he sneered.

Trygve bit his lip as he tried to ignore Oscar. He turned and began walking toward his house. He didn't see Oscar stick out his foot in front of him. As Trygve fell to the ground, Oscar taunted him, "Why don't you watch where you're going?"

All of the anger and humiliation of the morning returned to Trygve, and he scrambled to his feet and lunged at Oscar's leg, catching him and pushing him face-down to the ground. Then he jumped on top of Oscar. He took Oscar by the hair and smashed his face into the frozen ground. "Take that! And that! And that!" he shouted.

At once Oscar's father was there. He pulled Trygve off his son, and Oscar got up. He had a cut on his forehead, and his nose was bleeding.

“Ruffian!” cried Alfred Dahl. “You’ll pay for this! This spring we’ll find a new family to rent to—a family that’s deserving!”

“Go ahead!” retorted Trygve. “We’re leaving anyway!”

“Oh yeah?” asked Oscar in disbelief. “Where are you going?”

“To America,” said Trygve.

Mr. Dahl was clearly taken aback. “What?” he asked.

“It’s like I said,” said Trygve. “We’re going to America.”

“You can’t go,” scoffed Mr. Dahl. “Your father signed a renter’s contract.”

“Tough,” replied Trygve. He turned and headed for home. He had never felt so proud. He hoped he wouldn’t get in trouble for saying that his family was going to America. What if they didn’t go?