

Homesteaders Series

The Reformation
of Grandmother Hulda

Revised Edition

Book Four

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Chapter One
A Letter from Norway

October 15, 1870

At six o'clock on Saturday, Trygve finished the cabinets that he was making at the hotel in McCauleyville. He had left his job helping to build the town's new schoolhouse because he preferred cabinetmaking to framing. It was more detailed work, and even at age sixteen, he was already a skilled craftsman. He had been taught by his pa, and he had his pa's tools. In addition, the owner of the hotel was paying him \$1.25 a day, which was twenty-five cents more than Nels, Chet, and Sven were making at the boatworks.

Trygve gathered up his tools and walked over to the general store to buy a can of baking powder for Rebekka. The clerk handed him the baking powder, and Trygve gave him four cents. But as he turned to leave, the clerk stopped him. "Wait, Trygve," he said. "There's a letter here for Nels."

Trygve thanked the clerk and took the letter outside. Then he went to the stable, hitched the horses to the wagon, climbed up to the driver's seat, and headed for Jonstown. An hour and a half later, he turned the team off the oxcart trail toward the big wooden house that he and Nels had built for their large blended family.

Trygve drove the horses to the big soddy behind the house and parked the wagon. Then he unhitched the horses and led them into the soddy, where he brushed them, fed them, and gave them fresh water. Oskar and Elna had already fed and milked the cows and thrown seed down for the chickens, so Trygve finished with the horses and headed to the house.

As he rounded the corner toward the front door, he saw Nels approaching from the direction of the log cabin schoolhouse not far away. Nels had spent the day breaking sod with a team of oxen, which they kept in the lean-to next to the school.

“How was your day?” Nels asked Trygve when he was close enough to talk.

“I finished making the cabinets I was working on,” answered Trygve.

Nels smiled. “A nice way to end the week,” he said.

They walked through the front door together. Rebekka looked up and smiled at them. “I’m just finishing making supper,” she said.

Trygve handed her the can of baking powder.

“Thank you!” she said. “I appreciate that you remembered.”

“It was no problem,” replied Trygve. He turned to Nels. “But while I was getting the baking powder, the clerk gave me this for you.” He handed the letter to his stepfather.

“Who is it from?” asked Rebekka.

Nels took the letter and looked at the envelope. “It’s from my mother,” he said.

“That’s the first letter we’ve had from Grandma in the four years we’ve been in America,” remarked Elna, who had been setting the table. “I wonder if someone died.”

“Who died?” asked Oskar as he came inside.

“We don’t know if anyone has died,” said Rebekka. “Trygve picked up a letter for your pa when he was at the mercantile. It’s from your grandmother in Norway.”

“We’ve never had a letter from her before,” said Oskar. “Someone must have died.”

“I hope she’s not writing to say she’s coming to live with us,” said Elna.

Signe looked up from the shirt she was mending. “Why?” she asked.

“She’s mean,” answered Elna. “All she ever did was scold me.”

“She didn’t like our ma,” explained Oskar. “I was really young back then, but I could tell she didn’t like her. And she didn’t seem to like Elna either. She liked me best because she said I reminded her of Pa when he was little. She thought I looked and acted just like him.” He smiled up at Nels.

Rebekka picked up a knife and handed it to Nels, and he slit the end of the envelope and took out the letter. First he read it silently, and then he read it out loud.

To my son Nels,

This letter is to inform you that your father died on August 4th.

Your brother Torkel took over the farm after that, of course. He moved in right after the funeral, and it has been difficult

for me. I had to move out of the big bedroom and begin sleeping with Ingaborg so that Torkel and Vera could have the bedroom. Your sister complains that I snore, but I dare say it is she who snores. And now that Vera is the lady of the house, she has decided that she can order me and Ingaborg around. To think that I should have to take orders from another woman in my own house!

I have decided that it couldn't be any worse living with you in America, so Ingaborg and I are coming to the Dakota Territory as soon as arrangements can be made. Torkel is working on that now.

We plan to arrive in the city of New York, where we will stay with your cousin for one or two nights. When we get there, I will send you another letter telling you when we will arrive in Breckenridge. Torkel said that is the closest town to you that the train runs to. I expect you to be there to pick us up.

Tell your new wife to get a room ready for us.

Mother

“Just like I thought,” said Elna. “Someone died.”

“Your mother and sister are coming to live with us?”
Rebekka asked Nels.

“This could be a problem,” said Nels.

“A big problem,” agreed Elna.

Rebekka was silent for a long moment. Then she said, “Well, we’ll just have to make it work. We’re a happy family, and we’ll stay that way. It will take some accommodating, but we’ll manage.”

“You don’t know our grandma,” said Elna. “And our aunt Ingaborg isn’t much better. When I was little, she always bossed me around.”

Signe asked, "Where will they sleep?"

"Not with us, I hope," answered Elna.

"No," said Nels, "they won't sleep with you girls. We'll have to work something else out."

"It's too bad we told that new family, the Halvorsens, that they could use your soddy for the winter," said Rebekka.

"Yes," agreed Nels. "But then, Mother would never be satisfied living in a soddy when we're in this house."

"I guess we could put Carrie in with the rest of the girls and move the cradles in with us," said Rebekka.

Nels was silent while he considered that idea. "I think that's best, at least for now. We'll start by letting them have the babies' room. After a while, maybe they'll decide that they'd like to live alone, and we can build them their own house."

"Grandma's not going to like living with all us kids," observed Oskar.

"No," Elna sighed. "It's going to be a long winter."

"When do you think they'll get here?" asked Rebekka.

Nels looked at the envelope. "This letter left Norway on September 12th, and we just got it. So perhaps another week or two?"

"The letter could have been at the mercantile for several days," Trygve pointed out, "or even a week."

"True," said Nels. "None of us had stopped at the general store recently. I guess we'll have to check there every

day from this point on. It wouldn't be good if they arrived and there was nobody to meet them."

"I wish it was *our* grandmother who was coming," said Signe. "She was always kind to us. When I fell down and got hurt, she picked me up and held me in her lap until I stopped crying."

Elna shook her head. "Whenever I fell down, my grandmother told me to stop being so clumsy," she said.

"Perhaps she's changed," offered Rebekka. "Suffering has a way of making better people."

"Don't count on it," Nels warned. "Sometimes it makes them bitter."

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After supper, Trygve said to Nels, "We're midway through October now. It could turn cold and snow any day. Maybe we should put the topper on the wagon."

"I was thinking about that this morning," replied Nels. "We can do it tomorrow after church."

"When are you starting back at the boatworks?" asked Trygve.

"I'm going to keep breaking sod until the ground is frozen," Nels told him.

"That should be pretty soon, then," said Trygve. "Didn't the ground freeze around the 15th of October last year?"

Nels nodded. “Yes, it did, and we’re lucky to have had these extra days in the fields. We lost so much time working in town to try to pay for the house.”

“I should be in the fields, too,” said Trygve.

Nels shook his head. “Not when you’re earning \$1.25 a day making cabinets. That’s money we can use.”

Trygve was silent for a moment. “Yes,” he said, “but when spring comes, I want to be back behind a plow.”

Chapter Two
Meeting the Train

On Monday at lunchtime, Trygve sat in the kitchen eating hash and fresh baked bread that the hotel cook was serving that day. It wasn't as good as Rebekka's cooking, but it sure beat carrying a cold lunch from home every day, and it was free. If he went into the dining room and sat down at a table, it would cost him seven cents.

He looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. He still had ten minutes before he had to get back to making wardrobes on the second floor, so he went outside to get some fresh air. As he stepped out onto the front porch of the hotel, he saw the stagecoach stopped in front of the general store, and he decided to go in and see if Nels had received another letter yet.

The clerk saw Trygve come in and said, "There's another letter for Nels."

Trygve thanked him and took the letter. He looked at the envelope. It was from Nels's mother, and it had been mailed five days earlier from New York. Trygve didn't like opening a letter that was addressed to Nels, but he realized that time could be a problem. He ripped open the envelope and read the note inside.

Dear Nels,

We will be arriving on Monday, October 17th. Be at the Breckenridge train station at 2:00 to pick us up.

Mother

“That’s today!” Trygve said out loud.

The clerk looked up. “What?”

“Nels’s mother and sister are arriving at the train station in Breckenridge in one hour!” Trygve almost shouted. “There’s no time to get this letter to Nels. I have to go and get them.”

He hurried back to the hotel and showed the letter to Mrs. Boyle, the owner’s wife. “Nels’s ma and sister are going to be at the train station in one hour,” he told her.

“Then you’d better be on your way,” replied Mrs. Boyle. “I’ll dock you half of today’s wages, and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you!” Trygve called over his shoulder as he ran to get his tools.

In minutes Trygve was guiding the horses south out of McCauleyville. If he hurried, he could make it by three o’clock, but that’s if he pushed the horses hard. He didn’t want to do that to them, especially in a covered wagon, so instead he urged them into a fast trot and hoped that the train would be late. If it was on time, Nels’s family would just have to wait.

When the wagon pulled up at the train station, the clock on the wall said 3:45. Trygve looked around anxiously, fearful of what he would see. There were two women standing on the platform. The older woman had her arms folded across

her chest and wore a frightening scowl. When the younger woman saw Trygve, she, too, crossed her arms. Trygve thought, *It looks like I'm in for a scolding.* But he put a smile on his face and approached the platform.

“Hello!” greeted Trygve. “I’m Trygve, Nels’s stepson. Nels doesn’t know you’re here yet. I was working in McCauleyville and checked to see if there was any mail, and your letter was there. Although it was addressed to Nels, I thought I’d better open it, and it’s a good thing I did because if I’d taken it home to give to Nels, you’d be waiting here until tomorrow for someone to pick you up.” He hoped his explanation would put him in the women’s good graces. It didn’t seem to work.

Mrs. Olsen glowered at him and said, “Hmpf. I sent the first letter more than a month ago.” She did not introduce herself.

“But we just got it Saturday,” Trygve defended. “We didn’t expect you to be here for at least a week.”

“Well, we’re here now,” said Mrs. Olsen. “And we’re not at all happy that Nels isn’t here to meet us.”

The younger woman added, “And we’re not happy about having to stand here waiting for you.”

The two women pulled aside the canvas flap on the back of the wagon and climbed inside while Trygve struggled to load their heavy trunks. Neither of them offered to help. Then Trygve climbed up to the driver’s seat of the wagon and headed the horses toward home.

As they were leaving Breckenridge, Mrs. Olsen called up to him, “How far is it to Nels’s house?”