

# The Doctor's Funeral

*Agda Gronbeck*

I. S. '38

**J**OHN BJORNSON looked through the church window into the hazy light made by the October sunshine as it filtered through brown and red hard-maple leaves. He sat erect and stiff beside his wife, Christina, hardly aware of the people who were filling the pews around them, hearing only the hushed movements that are made as people gather for a funeral. But to him, who had sat through the long night before at the wake for the dead—alone with the body of his best friend, Dr. Karl Christofferson—the hushed sounds seemed noisy, deafening. He remembered the awful silence of death compared to which the whisper of the living seemed a shout . . . Dead leaves fell rustling from the maple tree—dead leaves that would become a part of earth.

He bowed his head and looked intently at his folded hands. Brown flesh was drawn tightly over big knuckles; the nails were brittle and broken, the fingers stiff and sore from picking corn. Karl's hands had been strong and gentle, with short, sturdy fingers—not the hands of a surgeon, perhaps, but of a country doctor. A twinge of the reality of death shot through John's weary numbness. What would Glennville do without those hands to dress its wounds, to deliver its children, to combine drugs into medicines in the back office, to soothe hot foreheads, to count the feverish pulses of its dying? A quiver passed through him, seeming to settle in his hard, dry eyes. What would he do without his friend Karl?

**T**HEY were bringing the coffin in now. John noticed how harshly the floor creaked beneath the worn green rug as the pallbearers walked to the front of the church. But now organ music began, and it was the only sound that filled the small room—strong, great chords at first which changed to a single, clear strain of melody and ended softly in a quiet whisper. It

reminded John of the Sunday little George had been christened—more than twenty-five years ago now. Karl had been the godfather for John's only son . . . . A year later Karl had shaken his head sadly at the end of a long night's watching with the little boy—"I can't save him, John," he had said.

Mr. Fullstad was reading the obituary: "born in Bornholm, Denmark, on July 15, 1872 . . . died at Glennville, Iowa, on October 21, 1937 . . ." The pastor was new to the community, a young minister lately graduated from the Minneapolis Seminary . . . He read as he spoke, carefully and earnestly, his voice well-controlled but seeming to hold a deep sorrow. It had not taken many weeks to know Karl well enough to miss him greatly.

THE church had never been so crowded. John looked around him and read in faces everywhere that Karl had been a friend to everyone. Old Knute Gunderson sat leaning forward to catch the words, his hand cupped behind his one good ear. Karl had made weekly visits to Knute's place ever since Knute's wife had had a stroke in August. . . .

John thought the odor of the flowers too fragrant and was relieved to see Nels Stenerson quietly tip-toeing along the south pews, opening windows. . . .

The Matson family sat together. John hadn't seen Phil Matson since his college graduation four years ago. Now he was an engineer on a rural electrification project in the northern part of the state. What a time Karl had had when Phil was born! He had worked all one night and had almost given up saving either the mother or child—but they had pulled through.

The minister stopped speaking, and organ music began again, this time to play the Danish national anthem. Karl, though he had served America as a naturalized citizen, had been loyal to King Christian, as was John. Now John sat with bowed head, his hand over his heart, remembering the homeland.

He heard a quiet sob, and looked up to see Jake Lander brushing his eyes with the back of a worn sleeve. Jake had not been to church for twenty years. He wore a white shirt, but in every other respect he was dressed in the same unkempt way as always, his whiskers dirty, his hair uncut and uncombed. John

remembered what Karl had so often said: "Jake can't last much longer the way his body is full of pneumonia and drink, but I'll take care of him as long as he's here." Strange that it had never occurred to them that Karl might leave first. . . .

**M**ARY ABBOTT was walking to the front to sing a hymn. Mary taught school now. It must have been ten years since Karl straightened her leg when she got it caught in the wheel of her bicycle. Ever since, he had joked with her about it. "Don't you go getting into any more things I'll have to come along with pliers to get you out of," he had said. . . .

Now Mary was singing, "Den Store Hvide Flök"—"A a Host Arrayed in White!" John thought of Karl's worn white coat, hanging in the back office, and imagined a host of white-coated doctors and nurses moving quietly through a great hospital . . . .

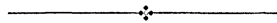
Behind the singer was the altar, above which rose Thorvaldson's familiar figure of Christ and the words, "Kom til mig."—"Come unto me!" That is what Karl had said to all those who were sick and weary and of heavy heart! And when they could no longer come, he had gone to them. For thirty-five years, John Björnson had driven for him when he had made his country calls.

The sermon was short; the text was given a new, significant meaning for those people whom Dr. Karl Christofferson had served: "Han frelse endre, men sigsel han kunve ikka frelse."—"He saved others; himself he could not save."

**P**ASTOR Fullstad spoke of the man who had been their friend. As he spoke, something tried faintly to focus itself in John's memory: he closed his eyes in order to grasp it better. He seemed to see a light—moving as though someone swung a lantern in the distance. Suddenly he remembered. It was during the flu epidemic in 1918 that he and Karl had stood together watching a lantern swung by Peter Nelson from his farm. Karl's time had been much in demand in those days, and it was difficult for him to leave his patients in town for the long trip. So each night just as it grew dark John had driven Karl out to the edge of town where they could see if Peter gave the signal that the Doctor was needed badly by someone across the river.

Whenever the signal came, they set out in John's sleigh following the light that moved in the distance . . . So much of Karl's life had been following the swinging light which told of people's need for him, though he was weary and half-sick himself . . . even though it was cold and dark, and he was alone. . . .

Now they were carrying the coffin down the aisle to the back of the church . . . The candles at the altar seemed to be lanterns swinging. Karl could not see them now, would never follow them again. But John must follow them awhile yet . . . He rose to become a part of the crowd that was leaving the church.



## So You Have Enlisted

*Ronny Ronningen*

H. Ec. '38

**L**OOK at the villages ripped by war  
Steel-torn holes in their concrete walls,  
Shattered windows and grounded spires,  
Ruins lighted with ghastly fires.

Look at yourself. Are you full of hate,  
Full of a thirst to kill? Drink deeply.  
Then, resting on the blood-warm sod,  
Dare you open your eyes to God?