

Not Good News

Hagemeyer Generations - Chapter Six

by Stanley Hagemeyer © 2019

January winds blew heaps of snow around the house and barn. It was the second year for Siebe and Bauwina. And they were finding out how poorly built their house really was.

“Siebe, there’s a little snow coming through the corner of the window frame behind our bed! I have never seen such a house of holes! Can’t you stop that hole up?”

Siebe was frustrated and embarrassed. Yes, he had already tried to fix that hole, but it was hard to fit something into the crack she was talking about. “Ya, I was working on that yesterday, and I thought I fixed it when I pushed some straw into the crack from the outside. I’m sorry, but this house is worse than I thought it might be.”

“Well, isn’t there something else you can do? This is terrible.”

“You must have a couple little rags or leftover cloth from one of your sewing projects. If I go at it from the inside, maybe I can stuff some thin cloth into the crack. Thick cloth won’t work, ‘cause it is a really narrow crack.”

“I will make sure to find something I don’t need to keep. I want that snow to stop! Are you sure this was a good farm to buy? The house is terrible!”

Then she stopped with her face turning down to the floor. She felt she had gone too far. “Oh, Siebe, I’m sorry I said that. I know you picked out this farm for us and it is a good place. It’s just that. . . .”

“Ya, honey, this is a terrible house. You can say that. I hate it, too. But I have plans to get us a new house. It won’t be right away. But if I can keep saving money, we can do it in a few years. And I want to build you a really good house. You deserve that after all.”

“Well, I’m still sorry I said that. But you said the barn is not good either, didn’t you?”

“Ya, that roof is so full of holes I can almost see the stars at night shining through. There was plenty of snow coming in where the cows and horses are standing in their stalls.”

He was discouraged, but tried to pick up some perspective. “This is the worst storm we’ve had. The wind is coming strong from the northwest and it’s full of snow. This is a real blizzard. If it wasn’t for the powerful wind, we wouldn’t see snow coming in, I think.” The wind had been howling for three days.

Bauwina was downcast. “Well what did you do about the barn, then? Those animals can’t freeze. The brown cow that is still giving milk has slowed down her flow some. It might be because of the cold.”

Now Siebe was in his own territory. “Ya, I know we’ve got to keep the cows healthy. And that calf she had last summer was shivering, too. I took some hay down and stuffed it into the corner where the wind was coming through the most. And I piled an old piece of lumber on top of it, so the horses wouldn’t eat it. That did fix it pretty good.”

Bauwina wanted to comfort him, now. She was silently berating herself for being such a spoiled child and complaining. “I know you are the doing the best you can. This storm will be over soon. I think the wind is quieting down this afternoon. It won’t be so bad tomorrow.”

A few days later Siebe took the team out for some exercise. The sun was shining down on the accumulated snow drifted in waves around the house. He hooked up the wagon and headed up the road to the mailbox. It was a half mile of drifts, but at most they were only a foot or two deep and the horses plowed through them eagerly. The temperature had come up to near freezing, instead of zero where it had been for the days the storm had been blowing.

They didn’t get mail very often, but it was almost a week since he had checked their mailbox, situated where their road met the Willmar-Montevideo road. It was the closest thing to being a highway, and the mail carrier did get around during the winter pretty well.

When Siebe got back home, Bauwina inquired, “Looks like you got a couple letters in the mail. Who are they from? One must be from your mother. I think that’s the stationery she used last time. Didn’t you open it?”

Siebe replied, “No, I didn’t want to lose it along the way. I want to see what the McLarty Thompson Land Company has to say first. My mother probably is just giving us the list of who had tea at their house, and who preached last week at the church, you know, stuff like that.”

He tore open the long envelope that looked like it meant business. “Hmm, this is some kind of statement. It tells how much money we paid last year and how much we still owe them. That’s all it is.” He had handed the other letter over to Bauwina to open. She was reading silently.

“Well what’s she got to say today?”

“Siebe, she says that your father has been sick off and on for a month, ever since Christmas.”

Siebe chuckled a little bit. “He probably ate too much of that fat duck she cooked for Christmas. That grease can make anybody sick.”

Bauwina was not laughing. “Siebe, this is serious. Here’s what she says, ‘Your father is not well. He has some days when he gets better, but then he goes backward again. And he is getting mixed up. It’s like he forgets things and says things that are not right.’ That doesn’t sound good at all. Here, you need to read it yourself, what I already read.” She handed the letter to Siebe and he pondered his ways through the German script.

The letter went on, “I’m so glad three of your brothers are here. John is going to be fifteen this year. Carl tells him what to do. And Albert comes over every day since he knows your dad is not paying attention to the chores even on the days when he is feeling stronger. Everything is being taken care of. But I cannot get your dad to go see the doctor. He says he’s feeling better all the time. The trouble is, he is acting strange. He stares out the window sometimes for an hour at a time. I am worried.”

Siebe and Bauwina looked at each other in silence. His father had been well when they left last year. What could they do but write a letter back. And what to say?

The spring months had flown by as Siebe worked the fields and planted each crop in a different field than the last year. He believed strongly in crop rotation to help keep the soil healthy. And their garden was producing ground cherries, the husk tomatoes he enjoyed so much.

In June they had a good hay crop because there was plenty of rain. In July their wheat and oats got harvested just before a hail storm swept through the area. A few neighbors were not so lucky.

In August, Siebe could see he was going to get a nice second cutting of alfalfa. But nothing demanded his attention right now. He was wondering when they would hear from his mother again. Each letter through the spring had confirmed his father was physically well for a while, but then again, slipping back into confusion and some kind of pain he would not identify. He just told Siebe's mother he had a belly ache. And he insisted on using a half spoon of baking soda to take care of that. But it didn't really take care of it, she wrote.

Last week's letter had been ominous, saying, "I don't know how long he is going to last. He didn't get out of bed for three days. And he was just ornery every day. I think he is in some pain. I am going to get the doctor to come out tomorrow, even if Koert doesn't want it. I need some answers. The doctor will at least tell me something."

Since then, Siebe made an effort to get to the mailbox every day. He was feeling conflicted about being so far away from his family. But he was the oldest of the brothers, and somehow he felt he should not have left his mother and father behind this way. There were four younger brothers who were all at a capable age now. They could take care of things. But should he be there?

Today there was a different kind of envelope in the box. There was a letter from his mother that had been mailed four days earlier. But the other unusual envelope was Western Union Telegraph Company. He did not start the horses moving right away because he needed to know the news. Opening that strange envelope quickly, he felt a strange foreboding. The message stopped his breathing. "Siebe, your father has died this morning. I know you cannot come, but wish you were here." It was dated the previous day, August 22, 1904.

Tears were coming into his eyes. He felt so helpless. The horses eagerly began to move as he snapped the reins, and he didn't have to steer. They knew the way home. Siebe began to cry and he paid no attention to anything, except to hold on to the mail.

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