

Pastor Unger

When we are sitting at the table over our evening meal, Aline tells us such a beautiful story about Pastor Unger. And it makes me happy to hear Papa and the others say that he showed himself to be a noble man, because I like Pastor Unger. If I had to choose from among all the gentlemen who come here to visit Papa, then I think I would say that he is the kindest and most jovial.

Pastor Unger comes here on the seventeenth of August, of course, and on other occasions when we are having a party, but the remarkable thing about him is that he does not come only then. He also comes on the kind of days when no one else would dare to venture too near.

We always say that we do not know how he works out which day in the midst of all our Christmas preparations everything will be most awkward and untidy. But as soon as two maids are on their knees scrubbing the bedroom floor and the bedroom furniture has all been moved out into the hall and two hired cleaning women are scrubbing the drawing-room floor and have moved all the drawing-room furniture and Mama is in the kitchen at one end of the baking table making saffron buns and the housekeeper is at the other end making the Christmas loaves of malted rye bread, and when Aunt Lovisa has moved everything out of the room off the kitchen so that she and Anna and Gerda and I can make the biscuits in there, when we are all wearing faded, outgrown cotton dresses and big baking aprons, and when Papa is sitting in the

dining room practically walled up behind the drawing-room furniture on one side and the furniture from the room off the kitchen on the other, then we know that Pastor Unger cannot be far away.

When he then comes driving up to the house in his little cariole, we lament the fact that a visitor should come on a day like this, and we tell Papa he will have to go out and receive him, for the rest of us are wearing clothes that are not fit to be seen. But we do not lament anything like as much as we would have done had it been anyone other than Pastor Unger.

As soon as Papa comes out onto the steps, he calls to Pastor Unger that it will be best if he does not get out but goes on his way, because there is nothing in this house today but womenfolk baking and scrubbing. But Pastor Unger is not the least bit disconcerted and jumps out of his cariole and comes up the steps to Papa. 'Ah, so you are all in the middle of your Christmas cleaning, too,' he says. 'I might have known, for Maria has everything in such dreadful disarray at home that I was obliged to make myself scarce.'

Then he goes with Papa into the dining room. Papa sits in the rocking chair as usual, but Pastor Unger looks around for the worst chair he can find and pulls it up to the rocking chair. And he has barely sat down before he starts telling a funny story.

A little while later, Pastor Unger comes out to the kitchen and the room beside it. 'I heard that you dare not come in and say hello to me, Louise, nor you Lovisa,' he says, 'so there was nothing for it but for me to come to you'. And if they are up to their elbows in dough, then instead of shaking hands he gives them a couple of affectionate pats on the shoulder, sending clouds of flour into the air. And he says to the housekeeper that he can see that our Christmas is going to be a failure, for the malted rye loaves are as flat as the thinnest crispbread, and the housekeeper retorts that there must be something wrong with his eyes if he cannot see that they are as round as a dean's belly.

Then he passes on Maria's best wishes to Mama and Aunt Lovisa, and once he has taken a good look around him, he

declares that in this kitchen they are all dressed in their best, compared to how everyone looks at home. Then he asks to sample the ginger snaps, for they are his absolute favourite, and checks in the kneading trough to see that the dough is rising and goes over to the stove and lifts the lids of all the saucepans on the hob to see if there is anything passable to eat or if he will be forced to go elsewhere for his dinner. Last of all, he dips a whisk in a flour tub and flicks flour all over us children. We are not slow to retaliate. We take the wooden spoons we are using to mix the biscuit doughs and throw flour back at him. A wild battle ensues in the room off the kitchen. We laugh and shout, the baking sheets are knocked to the floor and the fine, shop-bought flour billows up into the air. Aunt calls out to us to at least use the home-ground flour, but Mama drives Pastor Unger out of the room.

‘I can well understand that Maria was obliged to send you packing Alfred, today of all days,’ says Mama. ‘A madcap like you is the last person one wants around when Christmas preparations are in full swing.’

‘Fine thing for a clergyman, I must say!’ mutters the housekeeper, but so quietly that Pastor Unger cannot hear her.

When dinnertime comes, we have to try to make ourselves a little more presentable, and we all say that it is a real nuisance, but I do wonder whether Mama and Aunt are not actually glad of a little interruption to the work.

I know nobody whose words flow so readily as Pastor Unger’s, and I like him for it, but Papa, who has now been listening to him for two hours, has doubtless grown weary, for he is never in the best of health in the wintertime. Papa does not say a word all through dinner and leaves Mama and Aunt to converse with Pastor Unger.

As soon as we have sat down at the table, Pastor Unger tells us that he will have to leave Västra Ämtervik. His stipend is so meagre that he simply cannot live on it. He has told us the same thing every Christmas for as far back as I can remember, so we children find it rather hard not to burst out laughing when he starts on his usual topic.

But Mama answers as earnestly as anything that it will be a great shame for us to lose such good neighbours, and asks which parish he will apply for.

Then Pastor Unger runs through all the parishes that are vacant and can be applied for in the present year, and does the same for those due to fall vacant in the coming year, and for those that he did not apply for the year before. Then, unbidden by Mama, he tells us all the advantages and disadvantages of the various places, and what the stipend and the accommodation are like. He knows where the land belonging to the property is deficient and where the forest has been cut down and where the stable floor has rotted and where the main house has a leaky roof. And he is so amusing that it is very funny to listen to him, whatever he is talking about. It is not just the fact that he is amusing, however, but that I also feel I am learning so much as I listen to him.

When he has spent some time talking of parishes and stipends and vicarages, he moves on to the clergymen who might want to apply for the same positions as him, and tells us what marks they got in their theological examinations and their pastoral examinations and how many years' service they have put in and how they preach and how they conduct themselves at meetings.

And I find it as enjoyable hearing about the vicars as I do about the vicarages. I never tire of listening to him.

I do not know what Mama thinks, but she lets him run on until the dessert comes in. But as the meal starts to draw to an end, Mama says:

'You know what, Alfred, I still do not believe you will move from Västra Ämtervik.'

'But I simply have to,' he says, throwing his hands wide. 'I have virtually no stipend. I have to tell you, Louise, that sometimes we do not have enough food for the day.'

'That may well be,' says Mama, 'but I think you are far too attached to Västra Ämtervik to leave it, Alfred. And just think how well liked you and Maria are over there! That much is plain from the new vicarage your parishioners have put

up for you. There are few even among the deans who have somewhere as nice as that to live.'

When Mama speaks so seriously and at such length, everyone falls silent and listens, as it is not at all usual for Mama to make long speeches. And Pastor Unger falls silent too.

'You say your stipend is small,' Mama goes on, 'but think of all the joints of veal and the pike and cheesecakes and tubs of butter that find their way into the kitchen! They count for something as well.'

'Yes, yes,' says Pastor Unger. 'You are surely right, Louise.'

'You and Maria have such a wonderful knack of making your small income stretch a long way,' says Mama. 'We are always saying that we cannot fathom how you do it. Pastor Lindegren and his wife at Halla presumably have roughly the same stipend as you, but they do not have a carriage and horses like you, nor do they keep company with all the gentlemen's families in Sunne and Ämtervik and throw big parties like you do at Västra Ämtervik.'

When Mama has been sermonising in this way for a good while, Pastor Unger pushes away his plate, leans back in his chair and surveys the table with slightly clouded eyes.

'Indeed, Louise, you are quite right,' he says. 'And there will most certainly be no move for me until Gunnarskog falls vacant. But then, you see, I shall feel obliged to apply, for the Ungers have been clergymen there since time immemorial, and every soul in the place knows me.'

'Is that so?' says Mama, getting up from the table. 'In that case we must hope that the rector at Gunnarskog will live for many years yet.'