The Whip: A Mormon Folktale

Phyllis Barber

HEADED WEST, BROTHER AND SISTER GUSTAVSON pushed their handcart for many miles singing, "Some must push and some must pull" before their miracle happened. They inherited a wagon — all in the moment a hand could turn from side to side. It was a conestoga.

The former owner, a woman who had left her husband for God and Zion, had lost her only child in a drowning pond. A few minutes after the accident, she decided to follow this child into heaven. "Children are undefiled," she said. "Pure candidates for the celestial kingdom. I'll hold onto her hand."

So, there was a wagon and two oxen where there had only been a squeaky handcart. And, best of all, at least in the eyes of Karl Gustavson, was the braided whip left on the wagon seat. There it was. All curled up like a sunning snake on that high shelf of a wooden seat.

Those who knew Karl when he was a boy knew he liked to play with whips, to crack them, to use them to lasso bottles on fence posts. Just when he mastered the art of fly-swatting with his whip, however, his mother decided enough was enough. "It's that cracking sound I love," he told his mother, but she meant enough was enough when she said so.

So, while Hilma Gustavson loaded her loose assortment of dishes into a small cupboard left in a corner, pretending the wagon was her first real home in America, Karl practiced. He remembered everything, almost as if his whip had been taken away only an hour before. Hilma heard the cracking and snapping and whirring in the air just outside the wagon, but nothing mattered to her except this small box of a home. She folded her blankets over her alfalfa and corn seed, tied her looking glass to a wagon brace, and then sat on the high wooden seat with her hands folded.

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"Let's go, dear," she said, sitting like a priestess of the highest kingdom of glory, settling a pillow around her ample hips. "Zion is awaiting us." Brother and Sister Gustavson said good-bye to their handcart and joined in prayer for continued safe journeying. Karl whipped the oxen politely, and they were off for Utah once again.

Before Karl and Hilma went to sleep that night, he found every fly in the vicinity that might bother them while they slept. With a flick of the whip he snapped every fly into oblivion. Before long he got so he could lash the winged creatures out of mid-air before Hilma could say, "Karl, why must we have flies to plague us on top of everything else? Is there no rest?" After a few weeks, Karl began to coil the whip under his pillow, touching it every time he turned onto his stomach.

At first Hilma rejoiced in Karl's unusual ability. She laughed at his quickness and told him he was the best protector in all the world. After all, with his whip he could move the oxen, even when they didn't want to lift a hoof. He kept flies and their sticky feet out of their dinner — there was much too little to share. And he prevented the moths from gumming up their lantern. Many things were good about Karl's new skill.

About this time, however, he started taking the whip to square dances on Saturday night where he showed everyone how he could flick a fly from the nose of a sleeping dog. At first Hilma thought this was unique and allowed herself a little boasting. But when he took the whip to Sunday meetings and told the brethren he would protect them from any insects that buzzed them while they were revealing God's word, Hilma began to fold her blankets twenty-six times a day, count her alfalfa and corn seeds, and polish the glass on the dish cupboard even though it already shone, all as an excuse to stay out of sight.

"My dear husband, how about a new pastime?"

"Look at me, Hilma. Look how I can make this whip fill with humps!" He lashed the whip and made it ripple like the skin of a running horse.

"But," Hilma insisted, "you've mastered everything there is to master with this whip. It belongs to you enough. Find something else to do."

Long pauses entered into their conversations. Hilma could not keep from the subject of the whip and how Karl should lay it to rest. Karl could not keep from surveying his immediate territory for any kind of flying object, even floating cottonwood seeds and specks of dust. He could barely finish a sentence. His eyes and mind wandered from every conversation.

Hilma thought of hiding the whip, but the wagon was small, and nothing could stay hidden for long. She thought of burying it at the edge of the wagon trail, but because Karl had become rather unpopular with the other pioneers, he was always at her side.

Hilma started to pray at night. "Dear God. The whip. It is not good. All of thy little creatures are unsafe. I promise I'll never complain about flies again if thou will aid me in a solution. Karl is forgetting about thee. His mind must be single to thy glory. Amen."

She never knew quite how it all happened, but one afternoon when she was dicing a potato that had traveled many miles with them and was about

to be engulfed by a nest of its own white roots, she saw Karl's whip curled neatly on the axle of the wagon wheel. He had gone to priesthood meeting without his whip. Surely God had heard her prayers. She didn't even think about her actions. She swore later that divine intercession had moved her. She laid the whip across the cutting board balanced on her knees, and she diced, hacked, chopped, and sawed. One-half inch at a time, she chopped the whip into pieces resembling jerked meat — a luxury. They hadn't had any in so long. As she shortened the whip, she herself almost believed the bits and hunks were succulent morsels.

She peered into the water boiling over the fire and felt the steam rise in her face. Steam and smoke from the fire. She felt like a witch over a cauldron but knew she was doing God's will as she scraped the diced whip into the boiling water. And it boiled and boiled until the whip was limp and soft and edible.

"Your dinner." Hilma handed a steaming bowl of soup to her husband.

"Where did you find the beef, my resourceful Hilma?" He chewed slowly, his teeth unaccustomed to anything but root vegetables and bread. "I'm a blessed man."

Hilma smiled without showing her teeth. "God provides."

"Amen." He chewed with his eyes closed, remembering far away times when he had herring, rye bread, chopped onions, and capers on his table. "You are so good to me." But then he stopped chewing abruptly. "A fly, Hilma! Quick, my whip."

"I'm sure you have it with you, Karl."

"I don't see it anywhere." He looked inside the wagon, inside the dish cupboard, under the blankets, under the wagon. He checked the oxen. He looked in the cookpots. His lip quivered like it had when his mother took his childhood whip away. "Hilma. My whip. It's gone!"

Hilma pulled Karl to her side, put her large arm around him, and covered his knees with her woolen shawl. "You've mastered everything about that whip, so you don't need to hold it in your hand ever again. It's yours completely."

Karl thought about that for a minute. "No one can take it away from me?"

"No one," said Hilma. She patted his knuckles.

Karl hunched over to contemplate and finally shrugged. "If it had to happen, I'm glad it was on a day when we had a real supper. May I have another bowl of soup?"

As Hilma ladled the soup with meat into his clay bowl, Karl complimented himself for choosing Hilma as his eternal wife. "God knew what I needed and sent you, Hilma. The wagon, too."

She smiled quietly, rocked on her soft buttocks, and tried to keep her teeth from showing. "God is good," she said.