

Hans Brinker; OR, *The* *Silver Skates*

**MARY
MAPES
DODGE**



Introduction by Dr. Norman Budgey

Complete and Unabridged

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Hans Brinker;
OR,
The Silver Skates

A Story of Life in Holland

* * *

MARY MAPES DODGE

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Hans Brinker; OR, *The Silver Skates*



MARY MAPES DODGE

Introduction

Although the reputation of Mary Mapes Dodge now rests almost entirely upon that one memorable work of children's fiction, *Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates*, her contribution to the cause of children's literature in North America was far more extensive than is now generally realized.

Married young and widowed after only seven years, Mrs. Dodge returned with her two sons to live with her parents but, at the same time, determined to become financially independent. As a young girl, Mary Mapes had assisted her father, the well-known agronomist, in the publication of a farming magazine, and it was with his encouragement that she decided to try her hand at writing stories for children. The stories were well received, but by 1868 Mrs. Dodge was once more engaged in the editorial field, working in New York on the staff of *Hearth and Home*.

When Scribners, already the publishers of a successful adult monthly of superior calibre, conceived the idea of producing a junior version of the periodical, they invited Mrs. Dodge to become editor of this pioneer endeavor. Thus it was that Mary Mapes Dodge, in addi-

tion to producing a long series of stories and verses for children, bore for the last three decades of the 19th century the chief responsibility for the *St. Nicholas Magazine for Boys and Girls*. The first number of the publication appeared in 1873 and immediately established for juvenile reading a new standard which has never been superseded.

It is true that by this time there were a few brighter stars on the horizon of children's literature in North America—Washington Irving, Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Louisa May Alcott, etc.—but the era of *A Token for Children* and *Mary Lothrop Who Died in Boston* was expiring only very slowly and the morbid religious didacticism had been joined by the equally heavy-handed educational didacticism of such works as Samuel Goodrich's *Peter Parley* series. There was, then, something strikingly new about an editorial policy which rejected "sermonizing" and "spinning out facts" and declared that the aim of *St. Nicholas* was to provide stories and verse that would capture the interest and stimulate the imagination of its readers. That Mrs. Dodge was consistently able to implement this policy was largely due to her ability to persuade established and famous writers to employ their talents in the service of the young people who read the magazine. A list of the contributors to *St. Nicholas* reads rather like a literary *Who's Who*. They included Louisa May Alcott with *Jo's Boys*, *An Old-Fashioned Girl*, and *Eight Cousins*, Howard Pyle with his retold folk tales and legends and his own illustrations, Rudyard Kipling with his tales of India and the animals of the jungle, Mrs. Burnett with *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, Joel Chandler Harris with *Uncle Remus and Brer Rabbit*, John Bennett with *Master Skylark*, Mark Twain, Jack London, etc.

In addition, Mrs. Dodge and her associates realized that many children wanted something beyond mere entertainment, and it was also part of the editorial policy of *St. Nicholas* to keep pace with an advancing world, to stimulate ambition and prepare boys and girls for life "as it is." The magazine accordingly featured attractively

presented articles on history and geography, biography and science, hobbies and handicrafts, and even a section in which books for young people were reviewed and discussed. It was, indeed, thanks largely to the effort of Mrs. Dodge and her associates that the end of the 19th century saw the coming-of-age of children's literature in North America.

Such, then, was the calibre of the young woman who, back in 1865, had published *Hans Brinker; or, The Silver Skates*. A special personal interest in Holland had prompted her to read extensively in Dutch history and literature, and she had always been fascinated by the childhood reminiscences of friends who had come from Holland to settle in the United States. In her preface to *Hans Brinker*, Mrs. Dodge informs us that it is her intention "to combine the instructive features of a book of travels with the interest of a domestic tale," and she expresses the hope that she will be able to free the reader from "certain current prejudices." Fortunately, the work had no need for this rather pretentious justification. The characters spring to life and the background presents such a vivid panorama of Holland at the turn of the 19th century that the book achieved immediate popularity and has remained a firm favorite with young readers ever since.

It was part of the special talent of Mrs. Dodge that she could marry the nostalgic reminiscences of her friends to the factual details accumulated in the course of her formal reading and then, having scrupulously checked and double-checked everything, emerge from her work-room in a New Jersey farmhouse with a picture of Holland, perhaps a little old-fashioned, but in essence so authentic that even the Dutch were prepared to accept it.

In many respects, the technique which Mrs. Dodge employs to create setting and background is remarkably like that employed by Defoe in the pursuit of verisimilitude in *Robinson Crusoe*. Facts which could presumably be verified in an encyclopedia or almanac are presented with apparently meticulous precision. The reader learns, for instance, that Holland has at least ninety-nine hun-

dred large windmills and that the sails range in length from eighty to one hundred and twenty feet. The locations of streets, squares, statues, and even individual exhibits in museums are identified exactly. Established authorities are quoted. Motley is cited on the extent of the great flood in 1570, and the English cousin, whom we have soon recognized as an equally reliable source of historical information, keeps up a steady flow of judiciously interpolated background comment. But it is the wealth of minute circumstantial detail—the porcelain-tiled stove, the whitewashed interior of a church, the equipment of the ice-boats, the dog-carts, the spionnen, the glowing copper pots and pans, the potato salad and herrings—that finally leaves the reader with the conviction that all this must be true as nobody could possibly go to the trouble of inventing it.

As the title of the book suggests, the story has a double plot. One strand of the action deals with Hans and Gretel living in poverty with their self-sacrificing mother and their sick father. The famous Dr. Boekman undertakes to treat Raff Brinker, and for this service, for which he could not even expect payment, is rewarded in an almost miraculous manner. Raff Brinker now in his right mind again and able to recollect incidents prior to his accident, is able to restore his family to prosperity, and the great doctor, who has taken a fancy to Hans, offers the boy the opportunity to fulfill his greatest ambition.

The characters of the other plot are the boisterous children of the well-to-do. To most of them, at the beginning of the story, Hans and Gretel are nothing but the rag-pickers—the idiot's children. The reader accompanies the boys on their expeditions to Haarlem, Leyden, and The Hague, watches the gradual diminishing of the gulf between them and the Brinker children, and shares with them all the great suspense which leads up to the plot's physical climax in the match for the pair of silver skates. Both plots are well constructed with skilfully contrived crises and progress steadily toward their logical fusion. But there is a great deal more than the action to sustain the interest of the reader. The setting, as already

observed, is in itself a most remarkable achievement although, technically, it is really little more than the backdrop before which moves a crowd of boys and girls who, despite their very un-English-sounding names, constitute exactly the same sort of cross section which the reader is likely to know in his own community. In the gentle and ladylike Hilda van Gleck and the scatter-brained Katrinka, the van Holps, the snobbish and cowardly Carl, Fatty Poot, and the diminutive boy with the monstrous name of Voostenwalbert Schimmelpenninck, we recognize old acquaintances. It is, however, probably no exaggeration to say that for the more mature of Mrs. Dodge's young readers the main interest of the work really lies in the character of Hans. Capable although not brilliant, Hans is deliberately presented as an average sort of boy with whom the average sort of reader will have no difficulty in identifying himself. Although never rising to anything spectacularly heroic, Hans is resourceful and unfailingly cheerful and faces life with the unassuming courage and fortitude which finally make him instrumental in restoring the happiness and fortunes of the Brinker family.

Mrs. Dodge published a number of other books, including *Irvington Stories*, 1864, *A Few Friends and How They Amused Themselves*, 1869, *Theophilus and Others*, 1876, *Rhymes and Jingles*, 1874, *Along the Way*, 1879, *The Land of Pluck*, 1894. These works are now known to none save a small group of specialists, but *Hans Brinker* is still read with the same enthusiasm which greeted its appearance a century ago.

NORMAN E. BUDGEY

1. Hans and Gretel

On a bright December morning long ago, two thinly clad children were kneeling upon the bank of a frozen canal in Holland.

The sun had not yet appeared, but the gray sky was parted, near the horizon, and its edges shone crimson with the coming day. Most of the good Hollanders were enjoying a placid morning nap; even Mynheer von Stoppelnoze, that worthy old Dutchman, was still slumbering "in beautiful repose."

Now and then some peasant woman, poising a well-filled basket upon her head, came skimming over the glassy surface of the canal; or a lusty boy, skating to his day's work in the town, cast a good-natured grimace toward the shivering pair as he flew along.

Meanwhile, with many a vigorous puff and pull, the brother and sister, for such they were, seemed to be fastening something upon their feet—not skates, certainly, but clumsy pieces of wood narrowed and smoothed at their lower edge, and pierced with holes, through which were threaded strings of rawhide.

These queer-looking affairs had been made by the boy Hans. His mother was a poor peasant woman, too poor to even think of such a thing as buying skates for her little ones. Rough as these were, they had afforded the children many a happy hour upon the ice; and now as with cold, red fingers our young Hollanders tugged at the strings—their solemn faces bending closely over their knees—no vision of impossible iron runners came to dull the satisfaction glowing within.

In a moment the boy arose, and with a pompous swing of the arms, and a careless "come on, Gretel," glided easily across the canal.

"Ah, Hans," called his sister plaintively, "this foot is not well yet. The strings hurt me on last Market day; and now I cannot bear them tied in the same place."

"Tie them higher up, then," answered Hans, as with-

out looking at her he performed a wonderful cat's cradle step on the ice.

"How can I? The string is too short."

Giving vent to a good-natured Dutch whistle, the English of which was that girls were troublesome creatures, he steered towards her.

"You are foolish to wear such shoes, Gretel, when you have a stout leather pair. Your klompen¹ would be better than these."

"Why, Hans! Do you forget? The father threw my beautiful new shoes in the fire. Before I knew what he had done they were all curled up in the midst of the burning peat. I can skate with these, but not with my wooden ones.—Be careful now—"

Hans had taken a string from his pocket. Humming a tune, as he knelt beside her, he proceeded to fasten Gretel's skate with all the force of his strong young arm.

"Oh! oh!" she cried, in real pain.

With an impatient jerk Hans unwound the string. He would have cast it upon the ground, in true big-brother style, had he not just then spied a tear trickling down his sister's cheek.

"I'll fix it—never fear," he said with sudden tenderness, "but we must be quick; the mother will need us soon."

Then he glanced inquiringly about him, first at the ground, next at some bare willow branches above his head, and finally at the sky now gorgeous with streaks of blue, crimson, and gold.

Finding nothing in any of these localities to meet his need, his eye suddenly brightened as, with the air of a fellow who knew what he was about, he took off his cap and, removing the tattered lining, adjusted it in a smooth pad over the top of Gretel's worn-out shoe.

"Now," he cried triumphantly, at the same time arranging the strings as briskly as his benumbed fingers would allow, "can you bear some pulling?"

Gretel drew up her lips as if to say "hurt away," but made no further response.

¹ Wooden shoes.

In another moment they were laughing together, as hand in hand they flew along the canal, never thinking whether the ice would bear or not, for in Holland ice is generally an all-winter affair. It settles itself upon the water in a determined kind of way and, so far from growing thin and uncertain every time the sun is a little severe upon it, it gathers its forces day by day and flashes defiance to every beam.

Presently, squeak! squeak! sounded something beneath Hans' feet. Next his strokes grew shorter, ending oftentimes with a jerk, and finally he lay sprawling upon the ice, kicking against the air with many a fantastic flourish.

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Gretel, "that was a fine tumble!" But a tender heart was beating under her coarse blue jacket, and, even as she laughed, she came, with a graceful sweep, close to her prostrate brother.

"Are you hurt, Hans? oh, you are laughing! catch me now"—and she darted away shivering no longer, but with cheeks all aglow, and eyes sparkling with fun.

Hans sprang to his feet and started in brisk pursuit, but it was no easy thing to catch Gretel. Before she had traveled very far her skates, too, began to squeak.

Believing that discretion was the better part of valor she turned suddenly and skated into her pursuer's arms.

"Ha! ha! I've caught you!" cried Hans.

"Ha! ha! I caught you," she retorted, struggling to free herself.

Just then a clear, quick voice was heard calling "Hans! Gretel!"

"It's the mother," said Hans, looking solemn in an instant.

By this time the canal was gilded with sunlight. The pure morning air was very delightful, and skaters were gradually increasing in numbers. It was hard to obey the summons. But Gretel and Hans were good children; without a thought of yielding to the temptation to linger, they pulled off their skates leaving half the knots still tied. Hans, with his great square shoulders and bushy yellow hair, towered high above his blue-eyed little sister as they trudged homeward. He was fifteen

years old and Gretel was only twelve. He was a solid, hearty-looking boy, with honest eyes and a brow that seemed to bear a sign "goodness within" just as the little Dutch zomerhuis¹ wears a motto over its portal. Gretel was lithe and quick; her eyes had a dancing light in them, and while you looked at her cheek the color paled and deepened just as it does upon a bed of pink and white blossoms when the wind is blowing.

As soon as the children turned from the canal they could see their parents' cottage. Their mother's tall form, arrayed in jacket and petticoat and close-fitting cap, stood, like a picture, in the crooked frame of the doorway. Had the cottage been a mile away, it would still have seemed near. In that flat country every object stands out plainly in the distance; the chickens show as distinctly as the windmills. Indeed, were it not for the dykes and the high banks of the canals, one could stand almost anywhere in middle Holland without seeing a mound or a ridge between the eye and the "jumping-off place."

None had better cause to know the nature of these same dykes than Dame Brinker and the panting youngsters now running at her call. But before stating *why*, let me ask you to take a rocking-chair trip with me to that far country where you may see, perhaps for the first time, some curious things that Hans and Gretel saw every day.

2. Holland

Holland is one of the queerest countries under the sun. It should be called Odd-land or Contrary-land, for in nearly everything it is different from other parts of the world. In the first place, a large portion of the country is lower than the level of the sea. Great dykes or bulwarks have been erected, at a heavy cost of money and labor, to keep the ocean where it belongs. On certain parts of the coast it sometimes leans with all its weight against the

¹ Summerhouse.

land, and it is as much as the poor country can do to stand the pressure. Sometimes the dykes give way, or spring a leak, and the most disastrous results ensue. They are high and wide, and the tops of some of them are covered with buildings and trees. They have even fine public roads upon them, from which horses may look down upon wayside cottages. Often the keels of floating ships are higher than the roofs of the dwellings. The stork clattering to her young on the house-peak may feel that her nest is lifted far out of danger, but the croaking frog in neighboring bulrushes is nearer the stars than she. Water bugs dart backward and forward above the heads of the chimney swallows; and willow trees seem drooping with shame, because they cannot reach as high as the reeds near by.

Ditches, canals, ponds, rivers, and lakes are everywhere to be seen. High, but not dry, they shine in the sunlight, catching nearly all the bustle and the business, quite scorning the tame fields stretching damply beside them. One is tempted to ask, "which is Holland—the shores or the water?" The very verdure that should be confined to the land has made a mistake and settled upon the fish-ponds. In fact, the entire country is a kind of saturated sponge or, as the English poet, Butler, called it,

*"A land that rides at anchor, and is moor'd,
In which they do not live, but go aboard."*

Persons are born, live, and die, and even have their gardens on canal boats. Farmhouses, with roofs like great slouched hats pulled over their eyes, stand on wooden legs with a tucked-up sort of air, as if to say "we intend to keep dry if we can." Even the horses wear a wide stool on each hoof to lift them out of the mire. In short, the landscape everywhere suggests a paradise for ducks. It is a glorious country in summer for bare-footed girls and boys. Such wadings! Such mimic ship-sailing! Such rowing, fishing, and swimming! Only think of a chain of puddles where one can launch chip boats all day long, and never make a return trip! But enough. A full recital

would set all young America rushing in a body toward the Zuider Zee.

Dutch cities seem at first sight to be a bewildering jungle of houses, bridges, churches, and ships sprouting into masts, steeples, and trees. In some cities vessels are hitched like horses to their owners' door-posts and receive their freight from the upper windows. Mothers scream to Lodewyk and Kassy not to swing on the garden gate for fear they may be drowned! Water roads are more frequent there than common roads and railways; water fences in the form of lazy green ditches enclose pleasure ground, polder, and garden.

Sometimes fine green hedges are seen; but wooden fences such as we have in America are rarely met with in Holland. As for stone fences, a Dutchman would lift his hands with astonishment at the very idea. There is no stone there excepting those great masses of rock that have been brought from other lands to strengthen and protect the coast. All the small stones or pebbles, if there ever were any, seem to be imprisoned in pavements or quite melted away. Boys with strong, quick arms may grow from pinafores to full beards without ever finding one to start the water rings or set the rabbits flying. The water roads are nothing less than canals intersecting the country in every direction. These are of all sizes, from the great North Holland Ship Canal, which is the wonder of the world, to those which a boy can leap. Water omnibuses, called *trekschuiten*,¹ constantly ply up and down these roads for the conveyance of passengers; and water drays, called *pakschuyten*,¹ are used for carrying fuel and merchandise. Instead of green country lanes, green canals stretch from field to barn and from barn to gar-

¹ Canal boats. Some of the first named are over thirty feet long. They look like green houses lodged on barges, and are drawn by horses walking along the bank of the canal. The *trekschuiten* are divided into two compartments, first and second class, and when not too crowded the passengers make themselves quite at home in them; the men smoke, the women knit or sew, while children play upon the small outer deck. Many of the canal boats have white, yellow, or chocolate-colored sails. This last color is caused by a preparation of tan which is put on to preserve them.