

## *Spellbound* and the Ballad

By Birgitta Holm

Victoria Benedictsson's drama *Den bergtagna* (*Spellbound*) is a hot topic these days. It started last fall with a successful production at London's prestigious National Theatre, which presented the play without batting an eye as part of the Golden Age represented by Nordic Modern Breakthrough drama, a key card in the hand also holding Ibsen and Strindberg. The idea headed north from London to the youthful team of Jens Ohlin (director) and Hannes Meidal (actor), and the result was a performance at Strindberg's Intimate Theater in Stockholm: an intense, inventive production in collaboration with the independent theaters Galeasen and Limbo. At the same time a long-range investment in nineteenth-century women's drama is underway at several venues in Sweden – at Stockholm's City Theater, the Royal Dramatic Theater, and Riksteatern (the national theater) in collaboration with Östgötateatern (the country's largest regional theater), in which *Spellbound* is a major focus.

Moreover, no less than a world premiere took place at the Royal Dramatic Theater in May 2008. The setting was the series of readings entitled *Sanna kvinnor* (True Women), initiated by Stina Ekblad and Irene Lindh, two of Sweden's top actresses. *Spellbound* is one of the last things Benedictsson wrote in the months before her suicide in 1888. The text exists both as novella and as drama, and both were left unfinished. To date they have been circulated only in Axel Lundegård's edited version. The expression "*att göra en Lundegårdare*" ("doing a Lundegård") -- meaning to present a posthumous

adaptation in which no one really knows who wrote what -- might find a permanent home in our language,.

When Victoria Benedictsson died, she left all her literary papers to the “free disposal” of her friend and colleague Axel Lundegård, who took her at her word in every respect. First he had the novella printed in 1920, in *Samlade skrifter* (Collected Works), lightly edited by himself (without indicating how or where). At an early point he set to work on the draft of the play and completed it with acts credited to himself and deep forays into the extant text. It was published in 1890 with both their names on the title page but rejected by the theaters in both Stockholm and Copenhagen. It was not performed in a new version until 1908, first at the Swedish Theater in Stockholm, later also at the Royal Dramatic Theater and as TV theater.

The original manuscripts have resided all the while in the Ernst Ahlgren archives of Lund University Library. But not until now have they been issued in print: Atrium förlag in Umeå has brought out an edition faithful to the text and with notes and separate lines included at the back: the editor is Jenny Berggren. It is this version that premiered at the Royal Theater in a reading featuring Stina Ekblad as Louise, Reine Brynolfsson as Alland, and Irene Lindh as the artist Erna. Hardly any gaps could be detected by the audience: the play is cogent and crystal clear.

Among the pages of the novella manuscript is a note:

Den 18 april 1888.

Jag kan icke skriva det ordentligt ännu. Det är kastat ned på papperet i skälvande hast och nästan utan tanke på formen.

Det finns en lucka. Jag kan icke fylla den. Det är som att rista med en nålsudd i sitt eget hjärta.

(April 18, 1888.

I cannot write it properly yet. It's cast down upon the paper in trembling haste and almost without regard to form.

There's an empty space. I cannot fill it. It's like etching with the point of a needle on one's own heart.)

When this was written Victoria Benedictsson had just left Copenhagen and traveled home to Hörby. What she is etching from her own heart is the story of her last years with the great Danish critic Georg Brandes. "Packa?" ("Pack?") she writes in her diary before her departure. "Packa för att resa från Köpenhamn! – – – Inte se honom mera!" ("Pack to leave Copenhagen! – – – Not to see him any more!") Georg Brandes is not hard to recognize in the character of the drama's sculptor Gustave Alland, and a great many lines in both novella and drama are the same as those accredited to Georg Brandes in her diary. But what she etches from her own heart is also that she is heading for death, for a suicide deeply rooted in her life. A longing for death, a loathing for life, almost always parallels a courage to live and creative power in Benedictsson.

The days before she started writing *Spellbound* she wrote in her diary.

Åh, om jag blott kunde resa det finaste vackraste minnesmärke över vår kärlek!  
Hölja det med allt vad livet äger av friska blommor, ge det belysningar av en kär  
hågkomst! Och inte ett ord av bitterhet eller låghet och orättvisa.

(Oh, if only I could erect the finest, most beautiful monument to our love!  
 Envelop it in all that life offers of fresh flowers, illuminate it with dear  
 remembrance! And not one word of bitterness or baseness and injustice.)

Bitterness is not present in the text. But there is a bite to it. When the sculptor is introduced in the novella, we are told that he has “immortalized all of Europe’s princesses in marble.” It is well known from many quarters that Georg Brandes in his conversations gladly immortalized his ability to put all of Europe’s princesses at his feet. What the Norwegian sociologist Berit Ås calls masculine domination techniques are well represented. They are found in the body language described, shifting between attentiveness and preoccupation. They are found in Alland’s manner of taking possession of the room as soon as he sets foot there, and they are found in his remarks, unconsciously belittling and insulting the female. It was all rendered ably by Reine Brynolfsson at the Royal Theater.

But the original title is *Den bergtagna* (literally, “one taken by the mountain,” or “spellbound”). As early as the 1870s, long before her official debut as Ernst Ahlgren, the postmaster’s wife Victoria Benedictsson in Hörby devoted herself tenaciously to collecting folk tales and legends. She went around to the cottages, she recorded in dialect, she got things published in newspapers and magazines. She was also very musical and clever at the piano and liked to play for the family on winter evenings. One of the songs that was popular in Skåne, her province, in many versions, was the medieval ballad “*Den bergtagna*.” It is one of the nature myth ballads and is number 24 in volume 1 of the modern edition of *Sveriges Medeltida Ballader* (Sweden’s Medieval Ballads). In

Benedictsson's time the song came out e.g. in a collection from 1880 and it was recorded several times in Skåne by her better-known collector colleague Eva Wigström.

Benedictsson might very well have heard it herself in different versions from local farm women. One formulation in the novella points precisely in that direction, when the narrator says:

Han hade upptäckt min enda talang: att spela alla möjliga svenska folkvisor och polskor. Jag hade en tid drivits av en fullkomlig samlarvurm och kunde nu en oändlig massa dylik musik utantill och i alla variationer.

(He had discovered my only talent: to play all kinds of Swedish folk songs and reels. For a time I had been driven by an absolute passion to collect and now knew a huge variety of such music by heart and in all the variations.)

It often happens that theater, through its attention to detail, comes upon interpretations that academic research overlooks. Here it happened for me when the Royal Theater, with its reading, opened my eyes to the ballad's meaning for the drama. The song "*Den bergtagna*" can be seen as nothing less than an "intertext" to Benedictsson's *Den bergtagna*, the most crucial pattern from which the drama derives its meanings.

Louise in the play is a woman in her thirties who comes to Paris from an isolated life in a small Swedish town. She lacks experience of both the world and of love, but through her brother she winds up in the artists' circles of Paris. She is wooed by the famous Norwegian-French sculptor Alland, she is captivated, bewitched, but she doesn't

want any sexual contact. Alland is an advocate of “free love”: he has made it clear to Louise that for him love is a chance occurrence, a flower blooming briefly. But he has also let it be understood that it’s love connections that give him inspiration for his works. Louise’s dependence grows. In the second act she tries to tear herself loose and returns to Sweden, in an unused remark it says "Jag känner det som om jag varit instängd i en underjordisk trollvärld, där ljuset är flammor och glädjen består i människors tortyr." (“I feel as if I’d been locked in an underground troll world, where the light is flames and the joy consists of human torture.”) And on her homeland: "Kanske finns det räddning däruppe, där solen lyser på gröna skogar och där vinden blåser kallt från sjön." (“Perhaps there is salvation up there, where the sun shines on green forests and where the wind blows cold from the sea.”)

She takes her leave, but in both the novella and the drama the liberation fails. She no longer belongs at home in her milieu, there are no fresh winds blowing there, and the small-town confinement stifles her. She returns to Paris and in the fourth act she has given in to Alland. The act begins with her sitting, humming the ballad. Only the first verse is included in the text of the drama. But with the sparseness of the medieval ballad, the starting point of the process is given in two lines of verse:

Och jungfrun hon skulle sig till ottesången gå –

Tiden görs mig lång –

Så gick hon den vägen, åt höga berget låg.

Men jag vet, att sorgen är tung.

(And the maiden she was going to matins

The time for me is long --  
 So she walked to where the high mountain lay  
 But I know the grief is deep.)

A maiden is a woman who is still untouched and independent of a man. Here she is on the way to matins, the eight o'clock church service. But – without any reason whatever given – she chooses the road to the mountain. Her choice is as unhesitating as it is unexplained. In the next verse she taps "med fingrarna små" ("with her little fingers") on the door of the mountain and commands the mountain king to open. The mountain king opens the lock and leads the maiden to his bed, "i silkes-sängen blå" ("in silken bed blue").

Why does she deviate from what is expected of her? What is the source of her determination?

In the ballad the woman stays in the mountain for eight years. She bears the mountain king eight children, the last of which is a daughter. Just then, in connection with the daughter, she asks to get to visit her mother. The mountain king gives his consent on the promise that she say nothing at home about the mountain and her children.

The woman breaks her promise. Despite the fact that the mother's question gives her a chance to avoid the truth, her first words are to tell about the mountain and the children: "I berget har jag varit i åtta långa år, / Där har jag fött sju söner och en dotter så båd." ("In the mountain I have been for eight long years. / There I have born seven sons and one daughter so bold.") If previously the taking into the mountain has seemed voluntary, it is as if now for the first time she really becomes the mountain's captive. The

mountain king brusquely leads her back to the mountain: "And never shall you come inside your mother's door." The worlds cannot be united.

Back in the mountain the woman tells her daughter to bring her a drink, of mead, in order to drink herself to death.

Och första dricken, hon av mjödglasen drack –

Tiden görs mig lång –

Hennes ögon de lycktes, och hjärtat det brast.

Men jag vet att sorgen är tung.

(And the first drink she drank of the glass of mead –

The time for me is long –

Her eyes, they shut, and her heart did break.

But I know the grief is deep.)

With the ballad seen as its underlying pattern, Benedictsson's *Den bergtagna* becomes more open, more universal, and more forward-looking than it usually is believed to be. Normally, it is in the following decade -- the 1890s of such neo-Romantic writers as Selma Lagerlöf -- that the myth and the tale are considered to enter into literature seriously. Here they are presented as a basis for a love drama in the midst of a moment in 1888. The perspective is broadened, the ties to the autobiographical are released. An ambiguity enters in. In Lundegård's version the drama is subtitled "A Tragedy of Love." But *Den bergtagna* is no simple love tragedy. It is an investigation of ambivalence, that

of the woman between passivity in the external and activity in depth, and that of the man between apparent control and dependence on the deep.

In the ballad the ambivalence between activity and passivity is a basic choice. The woman is active from start to finish and the one in power in the course of events. She chooses the road to the mountain, she commands that the door be opened, she reveals the secret of the mountain, she orders the drink for dying. The mountain king is passive, at best re-active. He lets her in upon her request, he gets angry when she exposes him, he is not visible when she takes her life. At the same time it is as if everything already were decided. The outcome is there from beginning to end, in the melody and in the refrain's two lines: *Tiden görs mig lång* ("The time for me is long") and *"Men jag vet att sorgen är tung."* ("But I know the grief is deep.")

The ambivalence is captured in the text by Benedictsson. It occurs in especially concentrated form in the sculpture group toward the end of the drama. Once again it proves that a love connection has led Alland to create a masterpiece. It's as if he is just a receptacle for a power beyond himself, the woman's power, and his sculpture is a materialization of her power. The woman and her voluntarily sought "taking by the mountain" steps forth in white marble. The artist with his chisel, like the mountain king, proves to be a tool for an uncontrollable woman's will.

The sculpture is a group of two people that Alland calls "Destiny." "Destiny" itself is a woman of supernatural size, and she walks forward with purposeful steps. The body that she walks over is that of another woman, a body lying lifeless and naked on the ground. This woman bears Louise's features, and Louise describes them:

Dess lugn har något av överjordisk jämvikt: – den kalla blidheten hos den, för vilken människors önskningar och människors lidanden icke längre finns till – den heliga glömskan av allt det, som här benämndes gott och ont. Detta ansikte, på vilket dödsleendet ligger stelnat som en olöslig gåta, är en siars verk.

(Its calm has something of supernatural composure: the cold appeasement in the one for whom people's wishes and people's suffering no longer exist – the holy oblivion of all that has been called good and evil. This face -- upon which the smile of death lies unyielding as an unsolvable riddle -- is the work of a seeress.)

An unsolvable riddle. The riddle is both death and the woman. Accordingly Destiny -- that other-worldly creature resembling the very unfathomable and purposeful nature of her path -- also bears the features of the woman Louise.

-- Verne Moberg, trans.