

A Realist

By Victoria Benedictsson

Translated from the Swedish by Verne Moberg

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“Aunt Betty, did your son really write this?” asked Hildur Wide as she looked up from the newspaper she was reading.

“Naturally, or I wouldn’t have said so, would I,” answered Mrs. Sanderson with a smile of matronly dignity as well as maternal pride.

“It’s remarkable, how well he writes.”

“Why do you find that so remarkable, do you think Alexis is a dimwit?”

“God help us, little auntie, but I’d imagined him as an ordinary med student, why, that’s quite different from an author—a realist. Oh, Auntie, it’s so good!” She put her arms on the table, bent over the newspaper and continued her reading.

The matron knitted her children’s stockings without interruption—a present for her daughter’s first child—and the little double chin really suited her. One got the impression of homeyness just from looking at her round figure and jovial face.

The young girl was slender, dark-haired, and somewhat pale but it was not sickly pallor--on the contrary, her whole appearance was healthy and vital, and then there was a purity about her entire being, which almost inspired the notion that down and dust would not settle on her as on other people.

She was dressed in deep mourning for her father, though it was nearly a year since he’d passed away. She had never had brothers or sisters, and she had lost her mother several years ago. Her parents had left a not insignificant fortune, and she’d found a home with her maternal uncle, Headmaster Nähle. However, he had considered it best for her to spend the summer in the country, for her paleness gave him apprehensions about her health. It was for this reason that she now found herself at the home of Doctor Sanderson, a distant relative to the headmasterr’s wife.

“Why doesn’t he put his name on it?” asked Hildur suddenly and looked up.

“I scarcely know. Perhaps it’s for Papa’s sake,” replied Mrs. Sanderson, “since he thinks that Alexis neglects his studies; he doesn’t like it when he writes.”

“Does he write much?”

“I don’t know, you’ll have to ask him yourself. He’s coming home tomorrow, you know.”

“Does he write much?”

“Yes, oh how I miss him!”

Her aunt smiled. It looked as if she were thinking: does it sound that way already.

“But remember never to mention any such thing when Papa is here,” she said.

“Oh, I surely won’t.”

She bent down again and read. The sun started rising higher in the sky and shone warmly through the window they were sitting by. Hildur lay one of her hands on the window frame, turning it first to one side and then the other in order to warm it. It was a white, aristocratic hand, slender, plump, and with fine slender fingers.

“How old is he?” she asked again.

“Five years older than you.”

“Ah-hah, twenty-four. Well, then, that’s just right,” she said, it seemed to herself.

Her aunt broke out in a loud laugh.

“Oh, Aunt, you should be ashamed?” cried the young girl laughing and with a light blush, “I mean that it’s all right—how should I put it?—to appear in public.”

“But girl, I think you’ve been absolutely bewitched.

“Well, it’s quite remarkable to meet an author--a young author—who’s going to amount to something.”

Her mother’s face virtually beamed with pride, but she was silent.

“Does he tell you all his plans, Aunt?”

“Naturally,” the latter replied with firm conviction.

“He doesn’t write as well as Kielland, but then he’s much younger,” she said thoughtfully and afterward added with more spirit: “Do you know, Aunt, what I like about Kielland? Well, it’s that he never goes to subscription dinners, since a person should practice what he preaches.”

“Who is Kielland?”

Hildur looked as if someone had asked her the name of the king,--she looked utterly embarrassed.

“It is”—she was evidently at a loss on how to express herself—“it’s a Norwegian author.”

“Really, a Norwegian,” repeated Mrs. Sanderson with an expression as if in that case the matter didn’t concern her.

Hildur had finished reading and folded up the paper.

“Don’t you read novels, Aunt?” she asked.

“Oh yes, sometimes when I can find a really good one.”

“Doesn’t your son, the student, read aloud to you, Aunt, when he’s at home?”

“Oh, no, never, you’ll never get him to do that.”

Hildur fell silent and looked out toward the field that was visible over the garden hedge.

The lady of the house put away her knitted stocking, as it was getting to be dinnertime, and it was time to put out the food.

“It was true,” she said, and, turning around in the door, “I don’t think it’s worth your mentioning to Alexis that I’ve spoken about this to you. He might be annoyed.”

“Calm down, Aunt, I’ll trick him into telling me himself,” replied Hildur laughing.

When she was alone, she opened the window and with pleasure drank in the warm summer air. The scent of lilacs wafted up to her from the garden.

She was still thinking of the emerging author, whose signature she knew well from newspapers and magazines. There was something in his very language that she liked; it was taut, expressive, and never shied away from anything.

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The doctor was fetched to visit a sick person, and so only the mother and Hildur were there to receive the one who was awaited. They were going to eat later than usual, for the train didn’t come till quarter past three, and Hildur was sitting alone in the parlor with her work as the mother obtrusively ran around, first arranging the table setting, then looking out through the dining room window to see if her son was visible in the yard. The hired man had gone to the station half an hour early to pick up his trunks, and naturally his favorite dishes were on the table. He was the youngest of the children, of course-- Mama’s golden boy. And the only one she had at home.

Hildur too listened tensely for steps on the stairs; some of the general party mood had also extended to her. She was wearing her usual dress, but had put on a pair of brand new Parisian shoes; her only luxury consisted of the elegant footwear, and she had unusually small feet.

Her face was not regular, but the form of her head was unusually beautiful and even further accented the dark hair, which was combed back into a single heavy braid.

Finally the heavy, quick steps of the mother were heard across the hallway floor, tramping up and downstairs, and then there was lively talk.

Oh, so that was his voice? In his very careful articulation there was something of the gentleman. A pleasant voice. She thought she saw him already --cheerful, resolute, and perhaps somewhat brusque in his manner--but no, why there he was himself!

She got up and returned his greeting.

He resembled a beautiful woman in men's clothing: tall in stature and perhaps more handsome than she had imagined. His manner was easy, extremely polite but withdrawn, and his hair was on his forehead, rumpled and bluish black, his complexion was even, his moustache dark—and then there were those soulfully speaking, attentive eyes. They were shining behind a pince-nez, but it was impossible to tell their color.

His attire was more than smart, it was seductive.

And this was evident in everything from the pale blue, primly knotted tie at his neck to the tip of his handkerchief peeking out of his breast pocket. In his buttonhole he wore the bud of a moss rose.

They went to the table immediately, and although the hostess, on account of her all-consuming interest in her son, was charmed into ignoring her guest, the student always knew how to draw her into the conversation nonetheless.

Nor this was difficult, for Hildur was amiable and talkative. Before they had exchanged many words, it seemed as if they were old friends.

After the coffee had been drunk, Mrs. Sanderson went to take her customary short nap, and the young people were left alone to keep each other company. The open veranda was the most pleasant place one could pick, so the student carried a sewing table out to

Hildur as well as a rocking chair for himself, after which they took a seat facing each other, fanned by the summer breeze and with a view over fields and groves.

“I know what you need to be comfortable,” said Hildur to the student who with pleasure sat rocking in his chair.

“But I don’t know,” he replied happily.

“A cigar.”

“Do you smoke?” he asked spiritedly and jumped up.

“No.”

“Then how could you come to think of it?”

“At first you thought I was talking about the cigar out of sheer egotism, and now in the same breath you mean I’m the picture of selfishness. Now, as always, the first impression is the most reliable.”

“How so?”

“Well, you see, for several years I’ve been my father’s only companion, and I’m just as comfy for him as one of his best Meerschaum pipes. That’s why I like to see people smoke.”

The student happened to cast a glance at her mourning dress, He bowed lightly but fell silent, then took a cigar from his pocket and lit it.

Hildur worked diligently at her embroidery, but with a certain calm indifference, and without the nervous anxiety that usually comes over young girls when they notice someone is observing them.

The pause in conversation was long, longer than etiquette allowed.

Hildur looked up with an inquiring glance, She had a splendid pair of eyes, and perhaps she used them a bit too much, but remarkably, she could never be called a coquette. She appeared freer in her manner than other girls, but also more like a comrade.

“What would you like?” he said laughing. “Are you always this quiet?”

“Not always; only when I really want to enjoy the present.”

“Do you intend to enjoy my company this way for long?”

They laughed.

“No. But you know what I’m sitting here thinking about?” he said.

“No.”

“I can’t get over my astonishment at the pleasant surprise that was awaiting me here at home.”

“What surprise?”

“You.”

“Oh? You know me so little, you can’t yet know how pleasant it will be in the long run. But I have a pretty good idea about you; your mother has told me so much about you.”

“Mother’s descriptions are always partisan,” he said.

“Naturally, one must also take that into account.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Exactly two weeks. As you’ll notice, I’m already very much at home and quite content.”

“I must confess it’s a bit too quiet for me sometimes, now that my brothers and sisters are all off in different directions,” he said. “So by the end of the summer I often really wish I were back in Lund, but I hope I won’t need to do that this year.”

“That may well be,” she replied indifferently, “for the way things are, one has most to talk about with young people when one is young oneself. But, you know, I’m fairly old for my years, and I’m afraid you’ll tire.”

“No, you don’t mean that!”

She burst out in laughter, and for the first time she blushed.

“No, I really didn’t mean that,” she said merrily. “I say things so often I don’t mean.”

“That wasn’t nice.”

“No, when one is talking about oneself, it’s all right,” she said contentiously; “Everybody says things they don’t mean.”

“Not I,” he put in with a certain vehemence.

She looked up, and her eyes filled with laughter, but she said nothing.

“Oh, Miss,” he exclaimed, blushing. “You don’t know how I detest lies, both public and private ones. You don’t have the remotest notion how dear the truth is to me, above all else.” He seemed to be speaking seriously.

She looked at him in wonder and grew silent. It seemed so difficult for her to match the person with the author's signature.

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The doctor seldom came in to the family except at mealtimes, for he had a large practice and in his free moments read thick medical works. He was a taciturn man, always polite to Hildur and friendly toward his own but sometimes he could venture a criticism to the effect that his son was minding his studies somewhat too slowly--it had been different for him when he was studying for his degree.

On such occasions it happened that a twinkling glance flew from the student across to Hildur, who then had to bite her lip to remain serious. For the truth was that the gentleman in question did not do a solitary thing, other than write at his novellas and keep the ladies company, the last-mentioned endeavor taking up the far greater portion of his time. Hildur's eyes were always ready to resist these stolen messages, swift as lightning and without it becoming offensively familiar.

The student had even commented on this to her in a fit of candor.

"Yes, it will be my misfortune," she said laughing, "and I can't seem to stop; it's been a habit since childhood. I was my parents' only child, of course, and both cared about me but were totally different in terms of temperament as well as opinion. My mother was strictly orthodox and conservative to the extreme, but gentle and accommodating in temperament; my father was a skeptic and zealous friend of reform, sometimes melancholy and sometimes relaxed, always wont to miss the mark, and almost as lovable in his flaws as his merits. Oh well, both wanted to pass on their view of life to me, and I loved them both."

She grew quiet and turned away her eyes, which had grown moist.

"Their marriage was not completely unhappy, and if I hadn't existed, I think it could have been happy, regardless of the differences in their opinion. Now, however, they were in a silent, but constant struggle with each other over the child, whose soul each of them wanted to attract. How could I cross over to one's side, under the desperate glance of the other? I went back and forth between both and was led to the worst thing of

all; the lies. When my lips agreed with one of them, their eyes flew to the other in order to say that my conviction was nonetheless leaning in their direction.

The student looked at her with an empathy uncommon for him: there was something in this fearless honesty that was implicitly winning.

“But who did you agree with in your mind?” he asked.

“My father.”

With a happy, openhearted glance, he reached out his hand, and without blushing she received it, for now she recognized the realist, the man with the frank language.

She had read a great deal, even on philosophical subjects and the natural sciences. Her opinions and statements were generally bolder than those of other young girls, and sometimes it appeared as if she'd inherited something of her father's temperament.

The doctor's wife was often busy with household business, and then it was the two young people who kept each other company: they walked, talked, and read. For--to the indescribable surprise of Mrs. Sanderson--the student was actually reading aloud.

The first time this suggestion was brought up, the doctor's wife offered to get an appropriate book, and she re-entered with a thick volume bearing the title *Featherstone's Rose, or Crime and Love*. But the student returned the book with a loud laugh, after which he went into his own room and fetched Schandorph's short stories.

The doctor's wife blushed in humiliation, but from her son she would tolerate anything. However, it looked as if she blamed Hildur for his conduct, as she gave her a disapproving look. Yet the next moment she was nothing but sunshine again. Of course, Hildur was her declared all-time favorite.

It was quite new for the student to have someone at home who shared his literary taste. His favorite author, whose name his parents scarcely recognized, were old friends to Hildur, and they never ran out of things to talk about. It gave him pleasure to see how well she was able to follow his train of thought, and precisely because she never accepted his opinions blindly, he felt doubly flattered by the great confidence with which she gazed up at him.

“Are you really going to become a doctor” she asked one day, when they were sitting alone on the veranda.

“Yes—perhaps.”

“I’m so curious,” she resumed imploringly, and the student thought to himself that if she had got those boldly searching eyes from her father, she must have inherited those childishly soft lips from her mother.

“Mama has been gossiping, hasn’t she,” he asked smiling.

She didn’t reply but just moved closer, ready to listen to his confidences. And he spoke more warmly, more candidly, than he was wont: he talked about himself, his hopes and future plans. Now and then she put in a word, for she understood him so well. The respectful seriousness with which she listened to him did not make it easier to caress his self-esteem.

After that day she was his confidante in all that concerned his literary future, and he promised that, before his sketches were printed, she would get to read some of the ones he was working on.

One day they were invited out.

Hildur, who did not pay much attention to the way she dressed, was the first to appear in the parlor, already dressed. The student stood before the mirror while his mother – who had not had time to put his cap on – was occupied tying his necktie. They were so busy with what they were doing that they hardly noticed Hildur.

“But my lord, Mama, surely you can see that it can’t stick out that way!” exclaimed the student, groaning, “The d—l knows why Elna couldn’t have done it, when she was up there anyway.”

“My dear, Elna was offended when you ripped your clothes off because of the boots, which actually were quite nice.”

“Offended?” repeated the student contemptuously. “Really, have we come so far now that maids are allowed to get offended too! But Mama, you can see, can’t you, this that bow will not do!

“Then I think it’s best you tie it yourself,” said the doctor’s wife and left. His lack of consideration vexed her because Hildur had heard it—she herself was probably used to it.

He was not himself: a whiny, old womanish quality had appeared on his face.

Hildur’s eyes met his in the mirror.

Was this the man who was to be great, the unprejudiced, clear-sighted man – who was bothered by a detail in his apparel?

He blushed lightly—he could change color for the slightest cause—and ripping up the knot he turned toward her with his brightest smile.

“Have pity, Miss,” he said jokingly as he bent one knee and extended his arms with a youthfully graceful motion.

She sat down on a chair standing beside them and tied the tie, as he was on his knee before her.

“You’re conceited,” she said, smiling, but with a reprimand in her voice. “Fie, it’s not appropriate for a man to place such great importance on little things. What does a little thing like a necktie mean?”

“It means a great deal—when you’re tying it,” he replied laughing. “It means you have enough courage in life to step in where others despair.”

“And you?”

“I need you.”

He looked into her eyes—it was the first time they’d been so close to each other—but there was too much purity in hers for them to have to turn aside just for a warmer glance; they grew only deeper, moister, when she replied: “That speech is worn out—the one on muses, guardian angels, and all—you don’t need another one; you’ll have to learn for yourself.”

“Oh, my little apostle of truth!” she cried out, laughing, and this time his glance made her turn her eyes away.

“She rose quickly and blushed, but he payed no attention to her changed facial expression, for he was looking in the mirror again.

“Now it’s good,” he said cheerfully, “but let me look at you too. Today we’re hobnobbing with high society.”

He turned around and examined her costume.

“Don’t you have a longer dress?” he asked finally.

“No, this is long enough,” she replied, looking down at her dress and her small feet in the Parisian shoes.

“But, why, it looks so terribly simple. A long train would suit your figure perfectly.”

“This dress is made of beautiful cloth, sewn in a modern style, and it fits just fine. What else can one ask for?”

“A bit of elegance,” he replied and turned on his heel. She blushed and bit her lip but did not answer.

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Is there really a woman alive who doesn't take it as an insult if someone tells her she doesn't know how to dress?

Hildur decided to put things right, but acted as if nothing had happened.

The student was not there at breakfast the following day, and when he came down, Hildur was already sitting on the veranda at work.

“Miss, you can't imagine what a lot of things I have to tell you,” he shouted already from a distance, and flung himself on one of the benches a bit away from her.

“Still?” she replied cheerfully, “I think by this time you ought to have dealt with everything that's been on your mind.”

“Far from it. The remarkable thing is just that the more one speaks, the more one has to say. You also have a strange talent for drawing people out. It's like the most natural thing in the world to confess all one's thoughts to you, without your confiding the slightest thing in return.”

“If I don't talk with you about all sorts of things, then I can't help forgetting it just as fast.”

He fell silent a moment, after which he answered spiritedly, “Well, you speak so simply that everything you say seems like the most ordinary small talk; one really needs to think it over to realize one has been given your trust.”

“That's the way it always is with you fellows. Anybody that doesn't go around bragging and making a big fuss counts for nothing. They blame us women for being vain and superficial, but whose fault is it if we are? When are you ever impressed by unassuming qualities or everyday life? No, it's supposed to glitter, to catch your eye and

grab attention. As soon as you've get accustomed to what is new, it 's supposed to be something even newer."

"You're bitter. By God, you're annoyed; what for?"

"This desire of yours for novelty is demoralizing to us," she continued vehemently, and—I'll tell you something—it stifles happiness."

He moved closer and looked interested.

"How did you arrive at those thoughts?"

"By looking at you and Aunt."

"Mama?" He said the word slowly in utter surprise.

"Did you think I was speaking of my sick mother?" she said laughing, though her eyes flashed a bit. "No, why, I'm still a part of the new."

"Yes, you really are, for today I don't recognize you."

"Oh yes, you do all right," she replied joking. "You even recognize a young man who was fawned over by his mother, whose allegiance he accepts so indifferently, as if it were nothing at all."

"Nonsense."

"And you don't know how one can miss such devotion; on that point I'm more experienced than you."

He looked impatient. Surely this was verging on the sort of morality sermon that he detested most in all the world. He would like to be able to wean her from it.

"Do you know what this missing actually is?" he asked as he put his arms on the railing? of the veranda and regarded her.

"No."

He looked at her for a long time and a quality of refined cynicism came into his beautiful eyes.

She was crocheting without looking up, and didn't notice it.

Dropping his voice, he said: "It's a longing in disguise."

She kept silent but blushed.

He regarded her bent-down head with the combed-back hair and the thick braid, which from its own weight slipped down onto her neck, after which his gaze fixed on her fine, rounded hands, with the soft measured movements.

“How similar all young girls are!” he exclaimed. “There is one word that they all have in mind, but which they seldom have the courage to say.”

“And what would that be?” she asked without looking up, but with a certain will to contest.

“You know it: demonstrate your love of truth.”

She smiled and, dropping her voice like an echo, she repeated, “Love.”

“A beautiful word, but do you also know what it means?”

She looked up.

“I know it better and more beautifully than you, do, since I’m a woman.”

“But there’s a quality in love that you don’t know,” he objected. “It is free and doesn’t force, it is a law unto itself and has no other; duty is an empty word to love.”

“Love is a god,” she replied smiling. “Would he be that if he weren’t free, do you think? And you’re right, a cold heart tells me it’s my duty to love, but love thinks: it is my right. Oh, you thought you’d frighten me with that slogan?” she added laughing.

“No, but I’ve picked up a bit of inspiration,” he assured, and jumped up to attend to his short stories.

As time passed, his interest in Hildur grew more ardent and personal; he really battled with himself when he was to leave their conversation to go to work. His parents took note of all this and exchanged meaningful glances behind the young people’s backs.

It was getting to be the end of summer.

One day it happened that an invitation came to a great dinner at the residence of Governor Lebenshausen, the most respected family in the area, and contrary to her custom, Hildur seemed to be really pleased by it.

The student was dressed early. He had been in a rush all morning and now hoped to be able to chat with Hildur for a while before they were going to leave. However, she was not in the parlor, and he started to pace back and forth on the floor waiting for her.

He heard the door being opened and closed—a rustling of silk. He turned around.

Hildur stood in the middle of the floor and curtsied deeply, bowing like an artiste to her audience.

She was dressed in a black satin gown with a long train and a square neckline. Her neck looked even whiter against the agate collar and black lace of the dress. To the left side she wore a single wild rose in white.

“My unkind sir, am I presentable now?” she said with mischievous humility, putting her head to one side.

He had stopped in utter surprise.

She opened her fan and cast a gloating glance over its edge.

“You requested a bit of elegance some time ago,” she resumed. “You felt a certain compassion for the poor innocent who didn’t even know how to dress.”

He didn’t answer.

“And may I not even now win your approval, despite all my efforts?”

He fixed his gaze on one of her arms, where it was visible between the long glove and the lace draping at the elbow-length sleeve of the gown.

They were admirable arms.

She turned around abruptly and walked up to the window, leaning against its sill, pretending to look at the view.

“You’re charming—delightful!” he exclaimed in a tone that betrayed strong emotion, “but how is it possible--?”

“What?” She turned around, wrinkling her brow.

“It’s the dress I’m talking about,” he said hastily. “Why, it’s precious, fit for a princess—what’s the fabric?”

“I got the whole outfit from Paris,” she replied tersely, “You see, there’s nothing to it, if one just pays.”

He shook his head as if the whole thing were a puzzle.

She looked at him for a long time, wondering.

“Ah!” she called out and burst into laughter, “you thought I was poor?”

But suddenly her face grew dark, she came to think how in that case his words about her wool dress had been quite simply heartless.

She folded her fan with a clatter and left the room.

He stood looking after her; she really was as elegant as he could wish, but the surprise had left him bewildered: he felt like a stranger.

When she was gone, he knocked on his mother's door and stepped in—she was standing by the mirror fixing her collar.

“Mama,” he said, “is Hildur rich?”

They always mentioned her by her baptismal name when they talked about her.

“Well, my lord, didn't you know?”

“No, not once did it occur to me. She's—so simple!”

“It's a matter of principle.”

“How stupid,” he mumbled and left.

Within ten minutes Hildur had changed her clothes, and when she came downstairs, she cast a triumphant glance at the student, who was holding the door of the carriage. In her short wool dress, without needing to take hold of a handle, she put her elegant Parisian shoe on the footstep and jumped up.

All afternoon she was perfectly cheerful. There was a gleam in her eyes, a suppleness in her movement, which wasn't feigned.

She was celebrated and observed, but she had scarcely a word for the student. For his part, he cast dark glances at both her and those dancing with her. He himself danced very little, but instead walked around strewing witty remarks and sarcasm. Once he came and sat down close to her, but when he remained silent, she got up and left.

Then he avoided her.

After coming home, when they had taken off their outer wraps and the doctor had gone to his room, Hildur said good night to the doctor's wife and from the hallway to the student, then went right to her room.

But the student kept her hand in his and, stationing himself between her and his mother, so that the latter wouldn't pay so much attention, he said in a low, agitated voice: “Miss, how can you be annoyed over so little?”

“I'm not annoyed,” she replied evasively and tried to withdraw her hand from his.

“Is there anything wrong with my wanting to see you outshine all the others?” he resumed.

They were standing so close to each other, the lighting in the hallway was insufficient. She wanted to see what he thought, and then she came to look into his eyes.

They were deeper and darker than usual, and there was an intoxicating magical power in them that bound them to her own, and, she breathed quickly.

“Good night,” she said hastily.

“Good night,” he replied, pressing her hand and adding in a trembling whisper: “One needs courage in order to live, but if one has it, then life is full and rich as a glance like that.”

He didn't come closer to her but only looked, yet it was as if he had showered her with kisses.

She jerked her hand loose and hurried into her room. When she had locked the door, she undressed in great haste and was about to put out the light when her glance fell on a little package that was lying on the night table. She opened it, almost without thinking of what it might contain, for she was prey to a nervous agitation, and her pulse was burning. The envelope contained the first of the stories the student had promised to let her read.

To begin with she could not get away from her own agitated mental state, but gradually she grew interested.

It was a portrait of common people, simply presented, not idealized but somewhat cool. When she had finished and laid the manuscript aside, she sat for a long time staring out into space with a pensive expression. Afterward she suddenly pressed her lips against the hand he had held in his and put out the light.

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A person is seldom in such a cordial mood as after a reconciliation: one competes in humbling oneself in compensation, and this was also the case with the two young people. When they met at the breakfast table the following day, they outdid each other in sunny smiles.

Hildur was really beautiful, cool and fresh as the summer morning's dew. Something shy and pure had come over her that had not been there yesterday.

They had to stay indoors, as it was raining.

When the doctor had gone down, the student went in to both of the ladies, who had already been sitting at their work.

“Well?” he said, standing before Hildur.

She understood him.

“I thought it was really well written,” she answered.

“Thank you very much.”

“What was that?” asked Mrs. Sanderson.

“Just one of my sketches, which I wanted to hear Miss Wide’s opinion on.”

“May I read it too, please?”

“You wouldn’t understand it, Mama, it’s just a story about farmers.”

“Everything you’ve written interests me.”

“Well, that’s not the most annoying thing one can hear!” exclaimed the student, turning to Hildur, “You always say that, Mama. Do you like it?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“But Mama, you think that just because I wrote it?”

“Naturally, my dear boy. Isn’t that flattering?”

He flung himself into a chair and stuck his fingers into his hair with an expression of despair.

Both women laughed.

“Yes, admit it’s annoying,” he resumed with an energetic gesture.

“But it’s so sweetly annoying,” replied Hildur smiling and kissed Mrs. Sanderson’s chubby hand.

“Today you’ll be rid of your tiresome burden,” uttered the student after a sullen silence, during which he just regarded Hildur’s diligent fingers.

“So where are you going?” asked his mother, who could not harbor a grudge against him for one moment.

“To Baron Linde’s. He’s having a bachelors’ dinner.”

“Ah, my child, that’s what I hate most, when you go there.”

“Nonsense, a person has more fun there than anywhere.”

“Yes, but it gets so wild there,” said Mrs. Sanderson, worried.

“Yes, things can be a bit steamy there, but you can’t believe what fine wine he has.”

“I’ll leave your manuscript with Aunt, so she can be comforted by it while you’re away,” said Hildur, without paying notice to his comment.

“Yes, do,” he replied. “You’ll receive another one for your own account.”

“Thanks.”

“But my dear boy, please do be sensible now--otherwise I’ll be so sad,” said his mother, who could not put the dinner out of her thoughts.

“I would ask you, to remember, Mama, that I’m not a child,” her son replied haughtily.

His mother was quiet but reached out and patted him on the hand.

“You can’t believe what a sparkling wit our host is, when he he’s got into the party mood,” said the student, turning to Hildur.” He’s a handsome man under any circumstances, but when he’s had a few glasses he is quite charming.”

“Oh?” said Hildur doubtfully.

“Yes, you should just see him propose a toast.” The student got up, smoothed his hair back, and raised his hand as if he were holding a glass. “Never mind if he’s also leaning rather heavily against the table.” The student put his hand on the arm of the chair and leaned back, as an inspired smile spread across his features. “He has total control of his words, the form is free and crystal clear, and one is irresistibly swept along with the current. Then he becomes an idealist: his thoughts fly higher, his eyes shine, and he speaks of this thing that carries all of us through life.”

The student was not himself, as he stood there now, with his forehead free, a proud toss of his head and a bright gaze.

Hildur looked at him; she had never seen him so handsome.

“Well, it’s true,” he said sitting down, and patted his hair back again. “Linde is never so brilliant as when he’s—downright—drunk.”

He uttered the last word with cruel delight. To him it was a pleasure to unravel the mood he had woven from his own fascination.

Hildur regarded him with a mixture of doubt, disbelief, and admiration.

“There is a god living in the wine,” he resumed in his own voice. “There is always so much more inside a human being than he dares to release—more fire, more genius—a

sense of liberation is required to be able to go the limit. The spirit of wine endows us with this feeling. It's a divine spark that's kindled for the minute and then goes out."

His mother looked subdued but said nothing. Hildur wished he would have said all this when they'd been alone. And then he left.

After Hildur had gone to bed, she took out her little booklet and read.

It was a finely executed miniature painting in which careful detail concealed a lack of energy; there was something conscious and overly refined about the entire presentation that made the air feel stuffy and perfumed. But Hildur didn't notice; even if it had been poison, she wouldn't have been harmed by it, for there was sufficient within her to render it harmless: all the healthiness of a budding fancy, all the naiveté of a pure mind.

When she'd finished, she lay her head on the pillow and smiled, still and warm as though nothing but bright thoughts had Passed through her soul, and so it was in fact, for he was there in all of them. She thought she saw him and listened admiringly to her friend, who supported himself heavily against the table and who, with glass in hand, spoke of the immortal ideas, of this *something*, that carried us on through life. The words were soulful, the voice supple, and she saw the fascination shining in everyone's eyes, just as she had seen it in his. How fine this intensely vibrant spring life must be! Oh, to be a student! No, to be a little brownie who could stand at the keyhole and listen! Yes, that is just what she wanted.

She laughed at her own whim, it all seemed so merry. But then isn't every woman a simple little brownie like that, who stands outside, clapping her hands in joy over the slender ray of light breaking through the crack in the door? What a crazy notion! But wasn't it really true that he would become her connection to the world – with its ideas, and great thought...

Her notions grew dimmer, her eyes closed, and so she fell asleep.

The light fell directly and clearly upon the white bed, on the dark-haired head, and she lay still asleep with half-closed lips. Then she woke up, but only to turn out the light.

She'd already been asleep a long time when she was woken by the noise from the carriage.

"Oh, that was probably him coming. But how late it must be!"

Steps were heard in the stairway, but—God. What was it! Why, they were heavy and staggering-- had some accident occurred? She was about to jump out of bed and throw her clothes on. But no, what she was hearing was the housemaid's furtive giggling. That was no accident.

She lay down again and listened. Then suddenly she flinched at the sound of a voice, soulless as the noise an animal makes and human only in its blustering silliness. A drunk's effort to sing was instantly hushed.

But it was already too late. Despite all its sordidness, it was not possible to deny this voice: it was his.

She hid her face in the pillows like a child before a crash of thunder, but even after all was quiet, this soulless cry resounded time and again, in her ears and for each time, the same leaden-heavy terror fell over her. She froze, as if it had been the coldest night of winter.

*

The following day a certain sense of discord prevailed at breakfast, and the student didn't put in an appearance till at the dinner table.

His mother looked subdued but was silent; his father ate in haste while someone stood waiting to take him to see a patient.

The old woman followed him down to the carriage, and the young people were left alone. Hildur spoke more than she ate, and her cheerfulness appeared somewhat forced. The student regarded her surreptitiously and wondered if he'd somehow acted stupid--he recalled nothing.

After dinner he went to his work, and in the afternoon Hildur saw him come walking across the meadow with a hand towel over his shoulder: he had been bathing.

After some minutes she heard his steps across the parlor floor, and then he came out on the veranda. He looked hale and vigorous, perhaps a bit paler than usual. His hair was still straight from the water, his movement free and supple.

“So there, now we've had a proper swim,” he said happily, and “Now one can feel like a real human being again. Why, Papa and Mama are looking glum because their darling son has happened to tie one on again, as if it were some kind of tragedy.”

Hildur looked at him without answering.

“Did you think I was a paragon of virtue?” he asked laughing, flopping himself down on the bench. She looked up again. His glance was irresistibly open and candid.

“I’m afraid I did think so,” she replied, blushing.

“But you mustn’t think that, not expect it,” he resumed, looking into her face.

She dared not meet this glance, so she looked down again.

“There’s one temptation that’s more difficult for me than all the others,” he maintained, “and that is the desire to experience everything, to feel everything. I’m a realist to the core, and I cannot, I must not be unfamiliar with the life I depict. If I want to taste everything, then it’s in order to make my experience so rich that one day I might be able to say that nothing human is alien to me. Can you condemn me for that?”

She did not yet reply. She was just much too inclined to believe him in everything, to assume he was right about all.

“You don’t know what it means--that fatal day after,” he continued; “how empty one feels, how one thirsts for a single friendly word, how much worse it is to be rejected then than otherwise.”

Slowly he took one of her hands in his, and she let it happen.

It seemed to her as if they were both acting out a comedy, and her hand rested inertly in his, as a smile crept about her closed lips. This smile was ugly.

Now she was the one who had to struggle against temptation, against the lower aspect of her own nature, which under the guise of indulgence and spirit of self-sacrifice exhorted her not to demand the highest, to be content with what there was and to throw herself into his arms.

There are two verbs that even she had often heard combined: namely, to live and to enjoy.

She looked out across the fields. Far away they were visible in a bluish haze, and the sun was starting to lower.

“Nothing is gained by self-deception,” she said slowly as if frightened that the thoughts of temptation would hear her words and refute them. “You just used realism as an embellishment for your personal inclinations. It is more manly to see things as they are.”

“Oh, oh, there she goes preaching her morals again! Pity, and such a beautiful girl.”

He released her hand, and a minute of silence arose.

“Read me something,” said Hildur suddenly in her friendly tone of voice. “I’ll soon be leaving now, and then I’ll probably never get to hear you read any more.”

“Are you going away?”

“Yes, of course, why the summer is over, and I can’t stay here forever.”

“And you don’t care how things go for me and my stories?”

She had to turn her eyes away, for they were filled with tears. The young literature was so close to her heart, and in her uncle’s house the same was deplored.

“I can’t do anything for you and your work,” she said.

“Yes, you can stay here until its fate is decided.”

“And when will that be?”

“Tomorrow I hope to be able to finish the longest of the stories, and then it’s a matter of finding a publisher. I plan to travel to Stockholm myself to arrange the matter.”

“Now I like you,” she said quickly. “A person shouldn’t speak without acting.”

He blushed. There was something in this inconsiderate sincerity that baffled him; why, she was treating him like a mere schoolboy.

She noticed nothing.

“When do I get to read that story?” she asked.

“When I leave, I’ll leave you the draft.

“Thanks. What’s it about?”

“The marriage question.”

“Oh, I’m eager!”

“For me to leave?”

“The way you talk! For you to come back.”

“So then you’ll stay?”

“Naturally, if you hurry.”

They were now completely into the old rapport and had hundreds of things to say to each other; indeed, they were still sitting there talking when the doctor’s wife came and invited them to supper.

She reported on the relationship as soon as she saw her husband.

The very next day the student came down to his father's room and requested a private conversation.

The doctor took it for granted that the purpose was to ask his consent to get engaged to Hildur. His astonishment therefore was great when his son instead asked for money to cover a trip to Stockholm. The long-neglected studies and this --in his opinion --unnecessary expense appeared to the doctor to be rather worrisome signs that did not quite suggest betrothal, but he was in the habit of never jumping to conclusions.

"You have likely prospects, presumably?" he asked.

"How -- what do you mean, Papa?"

"I mean with the girl."

"Prospects -- well, I don't know, I think so, but what of it?"

"You should keep in mind that she's rich," said the doctor.

The son had several resounding phrases on the tip of his tongue--"What a poor incentive for entering into marriage"-- but wisely fell silent at the thought that he'd not yet got the money for the trip.

With a serious admonition not to let the fortune slip through his fingers, his father gave him a letter of credit in the requested amount, for despite all the grumbling about "laziness" and "the itch to write," he had a passionate weakness for his son. Moreover, he had got it into his head that Hildur would become such an excellent daughter-in-law that he was very amenable to her. He was led to understand that she desired this trip.

So the student packed his trunk. Hildur sewed on buttons for him on two pairs of gloves and was as helpful as could be.

On his departure the student left her the manuscript.

"It's the best of them all," he said. "It's the one that's to bear the whole truth: with it I stand or fall."

*

Hildur stood in her room, putting the last touch on packing the trunk.

Five days had passed since the student's departure to Stockholm, and still he had not been heard from.

Ever since he left, Hildur had not been herself. Her good mood had disappeared, she was sharp one moment and abrupt in her manner, and the next minute ready to burst into tears. But far from feeling discontent over these rapid changes, the old ones were pleased by this evidence of her attachment to their son and of the emptiness she felt when he had left. But what surprised them was her unswerving decision to leave. All their protests were in vain: she merely thanked them for their kindness, adding that now the summer would be ending, and now it would be time to go home.

Mrs. Sanderson still hoped that her son would come in time to meet Hildur; the express train would bring one possibility, and she had a suspicion he would come home that day.

The steam engine whistle from the station had just sounded, and the doctor's wife stood at the dining room window watching to see if he would come.

As expected. Now the front door was opened and, from the dark, the familiar figure appeared. His carriage was lively, his walk easy and vigorous; he looked up at the row of windows and then became aware of his mother. He swang his hat as a sign of victory, and she heard him rush upstairs.

In the hall they met; he took her in his arms.

"Where's Hildur?" he asked breathlessly.

"She's in her room packing."

The student did not register the last word.

"Mama, I must talk with her, alone," he said, happily hurried. He knocked on her door and stepped in.

"Publishers, patrons, friends!" he shouted, throwing his hat on a table and grasping both of Hildur's hands. She just looked at him.

"Hildur, can you understand this? Aren't you happy?" he continued, following his own line of thought. The express train went along at a snail's pace. I've been longing so to be able to tell you this: I was about to send a telegram, but naturally I wanted to see the look on your face, and then I had to wait. It is going to happen—everything I've dreamed about—a name, a future, and the struggle in life's great open arena! I feel so strong, so happy, I could conquer the whole world."

He kissed her hands tempestuously, but she jerked them away, wrinkling her brow.

“But what’s got into you?” he asked quickly, regarding her more attentively.

“Nothing,” she replied dryly and heavily, “I congratulate you on your success.”

“But aren’t you happy about it?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Are you ill?”

“Yes,” she replied to give reason for being markedly pale.

“But now I must see you healthy and happy, now more than ever.”

She only shook her head. It was as if she couldn’t get the words to cross her lips.

He led her to the chair by the sewing table and took a seat facing her.

“There now,” he said, being friendly, and stroked her hands, which rested on the table. “Now you must tell me everything. What is it?”

She hesitated a moment before she answering, and her lips trembled lightly, as when a child fights back tears.

“I’m so young,” she lamented, “and ever since childhood I’ve doubted and searched, been torn between opinions and factions, till I was so tired, so tired I saw no way out.”

She laid her hands over her eyes—these aristocratic hands he admired so much.

“It’s hard not having anything, no one to believe in,” she repeated slowly.

“And you say that to me, and now? Don’t we have life to believe in, isn’t it lying there in front of us, alluring and bright?”

“If I’d been able to look up to you with confidence, I would have cared for you,” she continued seriously, supporting her chin on her folded hands. “But you yourself have destroyed all trust; I can’t believe you—I don’t want to. And it’s best that way.”

“But what gives you cause to? Is it what you’ve read that...?”

“Yes, it’s what I’ve read,” she replied. “But of course we’ve talked about these things so often.”

“Yes, but not that way.”

“And my opinions on the subject have been yours.”

“I’ve been mistaken about your opinions; I’ve not understood them on one point.”

“At least you’ve understood that, by *my* future, I also meant yours?”

“How so?” she said sharply.

“Why are you trying, with all your might, to cause misunderstandings? You seem to be angry, and I can’t see why.”

“No?” she burst out, her eyes flashing through the tears. “You don’t have a shred of respect for us women—not one! It was evident between every line of what you’ve written. We could easily be forgotten--abandoned. Love is the only thing that rightfully binds a man and a woman to each other. Love is fleeting, and no one can command his heart: affection grows, and after the attraction has cooled, marriage is a crime.”

“But you’re upset by your own opinions.”

“My own! Because I consider honest will to be the main thing and that the wedding is merely an external form? For you there’s no content to this form. You don’t even believe in the will: you believe in, nothing except the impulse of the moment.”

“But Hildur,” he objected with a last attempt to calm her, “why, the best proof that I believe in the substance of marriage is that I’m asking you to become my wife.”

“Your wife?” she repeated. Her very fear of faltering brought her wrath to the boiling point. “After you’ve said all marriage is humbug— an untenable impossibility? Thanks very much!”

“You aren’t even true to your so-called opinions, you’re not even faithful to them, so what could I expect? Anyone who can’t believe in the doctrines he himself has preached must be pitied.”

“You’re beside yourself. Try to be calm for a moment.”

“No, I can’t. All those base, impure thoughts you’ve been thinking you could invest in the soul of your heroine—they express your true opinions of us women more clearly than words. Do you believe we are that way? Oh, it’s shameful, shameful!”

Throwing her head on the table and concealing her face, she burst out in tears.

The student looked puzzled. He was offended but felt sorry for her.

“Prudish is the last thing I would have believed you to be,” he said.

“You know I’m not,” she replied, hastily drying her eyes and audaciously raising her head. “If I’d been a prude, I wouldn’t have touched on this subject, but simply pretended I hadn’t understood.

“If you’d said the same thing but in a sound, wholesome way, then I wouldn’t have had a word of criticism. But there’s something stale and disgusting in the

presentation itself that's repulsive, at least to me. I'm not upset over what you've said but over the way it was said. A person is embarrassed at having read it."

Now it was his vanity as an author that felt insulted, and he turned bright red.

"What right do you have to bring all this bitterness down upon me?" he exclaimed in anger.

"What right," she repeated, jumping up, "what right? Since you've taught me, through your faith, to seek support for mine, only to let everything fall so I wretchedly low! Instinct often made me doubt, but I kept hoping anyhow."

"For what?" he raged, "for me to become some ideal-- a saint, an angel?"

"No, only that you would be totally honest, a powerful, original, nature."

"How dare you

"I dare, because I am right. I have dared to tell you right to your face that you've carried on about all the misery under the guise of reform, but actually it was for the pleasure of describing it. You talk of woman's indifference to man, and by this you mean she's allowed to be just as bad as he is. What lovely rights! There is something sick and unwholesome about the whole thing, and the evil is in the will itself, in the very thing intended to keep the whole being healthy."

"I'm leaving," he said, "There's no use saying anything till you calm down again."

"Even then the result will be the same," she replied.

"It's no great thing to risk all on being stubborn, just to make yourself important, but the regrets may come later," he replied sounding superior, trembling with rage inside himself.

Mrs. Sanderson came sneaking in on tiptoe. She looked worried and put her arm around the young girl's shoulders.

"My dear child, what's the matter?" she asked in a low voice. "Have you and Alexis had a disagreement?"

"Yes," answered Hildur between stifled sobs.

"Don't cry, don't cry, my child," said the old woman, patting her on the back. "Things can be all right again."

But Hildur shook her head emphatically.

The friendly little old woman went on speaking to her consolingly as to a small child. Finally Hildur got up and dried her eyes. She threw an arm around her old friend and leaned her head against her shoulder--how safe and calm it felt! But it was not her place, not now. She broke free and arranged her traveling bags, for they were soon to go to the table, and then it would be time to leave for the train.

The farewell dinner was rather sad though the hostess did her best to brighten the mood, and the host suggested a toast to a happy reunion.

The student and Mrs. Sanderson accompanied Hildur to the station "for other people's sake," It would have looked so odd if he'd stayed at home.

Hildur gave the old woman a good-bye hug, exchanged a cool squeeze of the hand with the student and a stranger's glance. Then she jumped aboard and into the compartment, the door was closed, and the train sped off.

It was a foggy day, and the smoke dimmed the windows. Hildur looked out one more time, her glance stayed focused on the student, who was standing on the platform, well-dressed and fine, blowing light clouds of smoke from his cigarette and speaking with an acquaintance.

Out toward the field the fog grew even thicker; how desolate it all came to appear; how remote, colorless, and empty! Gray on gray, like her own thoughts.
