

Excerpt from  
*The Big Book (Stora boken)*

© 1990 by Verne Moberg

Reprinted from the *Longman Anthology of World Literature by Women (1875-1975)*,  
edited by Marian Arkin and Barbara Scholar (Longman, 197?), pp. 24-27.

Hörby, the 23rd of August, 1886

Yesterday we were in Sextorp. We walked up the slope behind the house. It was just as the sun had sunk down behind a light, hazy wall of cloud. The lake was still, in gray-blue gauze. All the contours were drawn together as with a wide, soft brush. Ellen Key<sup>1</sup> and I were sitting alone on the bench, and on another farther away, Hilda, Hilma, Matti, and Karl. Ellen sat talking about the intensity that the sense of external details can have during exceptionally strong psychic movements....

While we talked about this, the others sat making small talk off on the bench. "Aren't you Schultz in *Erik Grane*?<sup>2</sup>" said Hilda, impudently unabashed, as usual. "Not completely, but there probably are certain features." And with this he cast such a strange glance at Mathilda. This abrupt utterance must clearly have broken the mood, and Matti felt a need to dismiss it.

"Look, there's a single round window up there; what a lovely view they must have from there," she said.

"Come on, let's see if there's one like it on the other side," he replied, and they walked alone to the top of the hill, where they stopped and looked out on the lake. And then it came:

"Buddy, do you think you can care for me?"<sup>3</sup>

On our way home, we all sat very quietly. I sat thinking how lovely Matti had grown -- more beautiful for each day since he'd come....

In the evening we had colored lanterns in the garden. Christian came home from Sven Thor's wake, had been drinking, was talking nonsense over Ellen Key and being unbearable. To get rid of him, we started walking around in the garden together.... It was completely dark. Matti and Karl disappeared. I wondered if they had it settled or if he was proposing then.

After the lanterns were extinguished, we went into the parlor....

When everybody had gone, I called to Matti.

"You know, he was in here swearing to Ellen that you two never got any peace, with Hilda around." Matti looked oddly indifferent. Something strange had come over her. "You know, Mama, when we were up there in Sextorp," she began dryly, inexpressively, in a narrative tone, "he asked if I could care for him. And then he said that he'd been in love with Anna Whitlock<sup>4</sup> for three years and that he'd been sick, and that he had lived the way young men usually did, and that I would probably never be able to care for him now. And, Mama, you know, when he told me this -- and he was in such a state -- so terribly upset -- I felt so sorry for him. He was so pale, and he cried, and he was just devastated."

"Oh? What about *you*?"

"I was so cold, I felt completely dead inside. It was all over." She dropped her voice to a whisper. "You know, Mama, I felt such disgust."

"Yes, but you knew that he'd been living that way, didn't you? And it hasn't been since he got to know you, has it?"

"Yes." Oh, there was such a heavy sense of shame.

"What are you saying?"

"Yes, I asked him. It had been since. It had been last winter."

The rigid look of horror on her face gripped me so, I trembled deep in my soul. I had never before seen how repulsive and hideous this was. I saw it now in this young face with its composed seriousness, its heavy sorrow, its tearless gaze. She looked as if life's happiness had passed her by and was now going far, far away, never to return. Only when I saw this warm, young full-blooded woman shrink back in the presence of this thing did I realize to my horror what it was: to drag one's best, most human feelings through the mud and then offer them up to the one person who has kept her own living clean. He had turned away from this wholesome young woman, for whom his feeling had begun to waken, and had gone to the sad gray sirens of the streets; he had touched them with his hands, and now he reached out these same hands to my child, for her to put her whole life into them, her whole world of feeling. And people don't call this arrogance! For me it was upsetting, frighteningly hideous. I asked if she would still think of him with the same feeling.

Yes, She couldn't feel anything but cold disgust.

Was it over Anna Whitlock or the other?

It was the other. She could not understand how -- after he'd already begun showing her attention -- it had been possible for him to go to the others. It was so disgusting.

I was afraid. A whole spider's nest of self-reproach was overturned upon me. Of course, I had known or at least surmised about his life, and not thought it was anything special: he'd lived like the others, and I hadn't felt repulsed by that, I could have kept them from getting together but had not done so.

I said that if she felt indifferent to him now, then she shouldn't keep from putting an end to it because of what people would say.

No, she cared for him. She didn't think she could put an end to it. (She said this with such suppressed anguish, it went right to the roots of my heart like a pang of conscience.) But she didn't know how she could get over the feeling of cold and repugnance that had closed in upon her like an iron door.

It will be up to him to get rid of it. Don't worry about it because he can, if only you care for each other....

Also, I told her that she mustn't go now and keep it all quiet and keep a check on herself; on the contrary, it would be her duty to talk, and only in complete openness would there be liberation for them both. Without compassion and without paying the slightest regard for his pain, she should disclose all her feelings to him, gather them up from all the nooks and crannies inside her and bring them out for him. Not one bit of doubt was she allowed to tuck away, not one unpleasant sensation, not one fear or suspicion. She should bring it all out now, so he might be able to clear it up, behead all the dragons. "And if he can't then you can also be sure there isn't any love between you, but the whole thing is a mistake, and it's best that you separate. I don't have to be afraid of giving you this advice, for nothing I could say to discourage or dissuade you is going to have the slightest effect, if you love him. And all the doubts I can bring up are less than nothing to him, if you care for him. Because if you do, then a single word is enough. The whole world can stand up and testify, and it won't have any effect: you believe him, you can't help believing, you believe despite yourself, despite everything that can be said, despite the whole world. That's the test, child, and if you cannot believe him, then you don't love him either....

"So you have to talk now, before it's settled, because you should learn now to understand each other and to be open; otherwise you'll never learn it. And you mustn't give in to your shyness, not grope for words, because now you have to have them, wherever they come from. Talk, and talk honestly, that's the first and last piece of advice I have to give you. And always remember, that love is a glorious thing, worth

striving for and worth having, but that it's nothing if respect doesn't go along with it.

"Naturally you can't sleep. Lie there thinking over everything you have to say and don't forget anything."

It was late, it was past midnight, and we got up to go to our rest.

I asked if she hadn't intended to turn to me, if I hadn't called her.

No. She probably would have wanted to, but not been able to. She felt shy and didn't know how to begin. She'd felt ashamed of what she had heard -- it was as if she were paralyzed. She was glad that I'd spoken to her. She thanked me. She had been walking around in a dull anguish, not knowing where to turn. Now she felt more secure, now anything could happen, and she would obey the advice I had given her; she would talk.

It was as if the constraint in her being had opened up. There were tears in her eyes, she embraced me warmly, and the coloring had come back into her voice.

Trans. Verne Moberg

---

#### NOTES

After Victoria Benedictsson committed suicide in 1888, her stepdaughter Matti and Karl af Geijerstam married. Matti gave birth to three sons, the youngest after the death of his father, eleven years later. She raised the boys alone and lived to her eighties.

1. Ellen Key was an important and controversial figure in the Swedish women's movement and Victoria Benedictsson's best friend. Hilda Benedictsson was the author's biological child, and Hilma and Mathilda (Matti) Benedictsson were her stepdaughters. Matti, her stepmother's favorite, was being visited by Karl af Geijerstam, from Stockholm

2. A reference to the 1885 novel by Gustaf af Geijerstam, brother to Karl. Schultz, an old friend of the title character, goes to Germany in attempt to cure his syphilis. One of the implicit messages of the novel is that the wife of Erik Grane made the correct moral choice in good-naturedly opting to "adjust" to his syphilis. See the article "Truth Against Syphilis: Victoria Benedictsson's Remedy for a Dreaded Disease," by Verne Moberg, *Edda* (1982-1983).

3. "Buddy" (in Swedish, *pysen* = "junior" or "squirt," etc.) was Victoria Benedictsson's nickname for Matti.

4. Anna Whitlock (1852-1930) was the founder of an experimental private girls' school in Stockholm where both she and Ellen Key taught. After the turn of the century Whitlock became an important figure in the fight for woman's suffrage in Sweden. She never married.

