

LITTLE EYOLF

by

Henrik Ibsen

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Introduction

Little Eyolf was written in Christiania during 1894, and published in Copenhagen on December 11 in that year. By this time Ibsen's correspondence has become so scanty as to afford us no clue to what may be called the biographical antecedents of the play. Even of anecdotic history very little attaches to it. For only one of the characters has a definite model been suggested. Ibsen himself told his French translator, Count Prozor, that the original of the Rat-Wife was "a little old woman who came to kill rats at the school where he was educated. She carried a little dog in a bag, and it was said that children had been drowned through following her." This means that Ibsen did not himself adapt to his uses the legend so familiar to us in Browning's *Pied Piper of Hamelin*, but found it ready adapted by the popular imagination of his native place, Skien. "This idea," Ibsen continued to Count Prozor, "was just what I wanted for bringing about the disappearance of Little Eyolf, in whom the infatuation [Note: The French word used by Count Prozor is "infatuation." I can think of no other rendering for it; but I do not quite know what it means as applied to Allmers and Eyolf.] and the feebleness of his father reproduced, but concentrated, exaggerated, as one often sees them in the son of such a father." Dr. Elias tells us that a well-known lady-artist, who in middle life suggested to him the figure of Lona Hessel, was in later years the model for the Rat-Wife. There is no inconsistency between these two accounts of the matter. The idea was doubtless suggested by his recollection of the rat-catcher of Skien, while traits of manner and physiognomy might be borrowed from the lady in question.

The verse quoted on pp. 52 and 53 [Transcriber's Note: "There stood the champagne," etc., in ACT I] is the last line of a very well-known poem by Johan Sebastian Welhaven, entitled *Republikanerne*, written in 1839. An unknown guest in a Paris restaurant has been challenged by a noisy party of young Frenchmen to join them in drinking a health to Poland. He refuses; they denounce him as a craven and a slave; he bares his breast and shows the scars of wounds received in fighting for the country whose lost cause has become a subject for conventional enthusiasm and windy rhetoric.

"De saae pas hverandre. Han vandred sin vei.
De havde champagne, men rörte den ei."

"They looked at each other. He went on his way. There stood their champagne, but they did not touch it." The champagne incident leads me to wonder whether the relation between Rita and Allmers may not have been partly suggested to Ibsen by the relation between Charlotte Stieglitz and her weakling of a husband. Their story must have been known to him through George Brandes's *Young Germany*, if not more directly. "From time to time," says Dr. Brandes, "there

came over her what she calls her champagne-mood; she grieves that this is no longer the case with him." [Note: Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature, vol. vi. p. 299] Did the germ of the incident lie in these words?

The first performance of the play in Norway took place at the Christiania Theatre on January 15, 1895, Fru Wettergren playing Rita and Fru Dybwad, Asta. In Copenhagen (March 13, 1895) Fru Oda Nielsen and Fru Hennings played Rita and Asta respectively, while Emil Poulsen played Allmers. The first German Rita (Deutsches Theater, Berlin, January 12, 1895) was Frau Agnes Sorma, with Reicher as Allmers. Six weeks later Fr. Sandrock played Rita at the Burgtheater, Vienna. In May 1895 the play was acted by M. Lugué-Poë's company in Paris. The first performance in English took place at the Avenue Theatre, London, on the afternoon of November 23, 1896, with Miss Janet Achurch as Rita, Miss Elizabeth Robins as Asta, and Mrs. Patrick Campbell as the Rat-Wife. Miss Achurch's Rita made a profound impression. Mrs. Patrick Campbell afterwards played the part in a short series of evening performances. In the spring of 1895 the play was acted in Chicago by a company of Scandinavian amateurs, presumably in Norwegian. Fru Oda Nielsen has recently (I understand) given some performances of it in New York, and Madame Alla Nazimova has announced it for production during the coming season (1907-1908).

As the external history of *Little Eyolf* is so short. I am tempted to depart from my usual practice, and say a few words as to its matter and meaning.

George Brandes, writing of this play, has rightly observed that "a kind of dualism has always been perceptible in Ibsen; he pleads the cause of Nature, and he castigates Nature with mystic morality; only sometimes Nature is allowed the first voice, sometimes morality. In *The Master Builder* and in *Ghosts* the lover of Nature in Ibsen was predominant; here, as in *Brand* and *The Wild Duck*, the castigator is in the ascendant." So clearly is this the case in *Little Eyolf* that Ibsen seems almost to fall into line with Mr. Thomas Hardy. To say nothing of analogies of detail between *Little Eyolf* and *Jude the Obscure*, there is this radical analogy, that they are both utterances of a profound pessimism, both indictments of Nature.

But while Mr. Hardy's pessimism is plaintive and passive, Ibsen's is stoical and almost bracing. It is true that in this play he is no longer the mere "indignation pessimist" whom Dr. Brandes quite justly recognised in his earlier works. His analysis has gone deeper into the heart of things, and he has put off the satirist and the iconoclast. But there is in his thought an incompressible energy of revolt. A pessimist in contemplation, he remains a meliorist in action. He is not, like Mr. Hardy, content to let the flag droop half-mast high; his protagonist still runs it up to the mast-head, and looks forward steadily to the "heavy day of work" before him. But although the note of the conclusion is resolute, almost serene, the play remains none the less an indictment of Nature, or at least of that egoism of passion which is one of her most potent subtleties. In this view, Allmers becomes a type of what we may roughly call the "free moral agent"; Eyolf, a type of humanity conceived as passive and suffering, thrust will-less into existence, with boundless aspirations and cruelly limited powers; Rita, a type of the egoistic instinct which is "a consuming fire"; and Asta, a type of the beneficent love which is possible only so long as it is exempt from "the law of change." Allmers, then, is self-conscious egoism, egoism which can now and then break its chains, look in its own visage, realise and shrink from itself; while Rita, until she has passed through the awful crisis which forms the matter of the play, is unconscious, reckless, and ruthless egoism, exigent and jealous, "holding to its rights," and incapable even of rising into the secondary stage of maternal love. The offspring and the victim of these egoisms is Eyolf, "little wounded warrior," who longs to scale the heights and dive into the depths, but must remain for ever chained to the crutch of human infirmity. For years Allmers has been a restless and half-reluctant slave to Rita's imperious temperament. He has dreamed and theorised about "responsibility," and has kept Eyolf poring over his books, in the hope that, despite his misfortune, he may one day minister to parental vanity. Finally he breaks away from Rita, for the first time "in all these ten years," goes up "into the infinite solitudes," looks Death in the face, and returns shrinking from passion, yearning towards selfless love, and filled with a profound and remorseful pity for the lot of poor maimed humanity. He will "help Eyolf to bring his desires into harmony with what lies attainable before him." He will "create a conscious happiness in his mind." And here the drama opens.

Before the Rat-Wife enters, let me pause for a moment to point out that here again Ibsen adopts that characteristic method which, in writing of *The Lady from the Sea* and *The Master Builder*, I have compared to the method of Hawthorne. The story he tells is not really, or rather not inevitably, supernatural. Everything is explicable within this limits of nature; but supernatural agency is also vaguely suggested, and the reader's imagination is stimulated, without any absolute violence to his sense of reality. On the plane of everyday life, then, the Rat-Wife is a crazy and uncanny old woman, fabled by the peasants to be a were-wolf in

her leisure moments, who goes about the country killing vermin. Coming across an impressionable child, she tells him a preposterous tale, adapted from the old "Pied Piper" legends, of her method of fascinating her victims. The child, whose imagination has long dwelt on this personage, is in fact hypnotised by her, follows her down to the sea, and, watching her row away, turns dizzy, falls in, and is drowned. There is nothing impossible, nothing even improbable, in this. At the same time, there cannot be the least doubt, I think, that in the poet's mind the Rat-Wife is the symbol of Death, of the "still, soft darkness" that is at once so fearful and so fascinating to humanity. This is clear not only in the text of her single scene, but in the fact that Allmers, in the last act, treats her and his "fellow-traveller" of that night among the mountains, not precisely as identical, but as interchangeable, ideas. To tell the truth, I have even my own suspicions as to who is meant by "her sweetheart," whom she "lured" long ago, and who is now "down where all the rats are." This theory I shall keep to myself; it may be purely fantastic, and is at best inessential. What is certain is that death carries off Little Eyolf, and that, of all he was, only the crutch is left, mute witness to his hapless lot.

He is gone; there was so little to bind him to life that he made not even a moment's struggle against the allurements of the "long, sweet sleep." Then, for the first time, the depth of the egoism which had created and conditioned his little life bursts upon his parents' horror-stricken gaze. Like accomplices in crime, they turn upon and accuse each other--"sorrow makes them wicked and hateful." Allmers, as the one whose eyes were already half opened, is the first to carry war into the enemy's country; but Rita is not slow to retort, and presently they both have to admit that their recriminations are only a vain attempt to drown the voice of self-reproach. In a sort of fierce frenzy they tear away veil after veil from their souls, until they realise that Eyolf never existed at all, so to speak, for his own sake, but only for the sake of their passions and vanities. "Isn't it curious," says Rita, summing up the matter, "that we should grieve like this over a little stranger boy?"

In blind self-absorption they have played with life and death, and now "the great open eyes" of the stranger boy will be for ever upon them. Allmers would fain take refuge in a love untainted by the egoism, and unexposed to the revulsions, of passion. But not only is Asta's pity for Rita too strong to let her countenance this desertion: she has discovered that her relation to Allmers is not "exempt from the law of change," and she "takes flight from him-- and from herself." Meanwhile it appears that the agony which Allmers and Rita have endured in probing their wounds has been, as Halvard Solness would say, "salutary self-torture." The consuming fire of passion is now quenched, but "it, has left an empty place within them," and they feel it common need "to fill it up with something that is a little like love." They come to remember that there are other children in the world on whom reckless instinct has thrust the gift, of life--neglected children, stunted and maimed in mind if not in body. And now that her egoism is seared to the quick, the mother-instinct asserts itself in Rita. She will take these children to her--these

children to whom her hand and her heart have hitherto been closed. They shall be outwardly in Eyolf's place, and perhaps in time they may fill the place in her heart that should have been Eyolf's. Thus she will try to "make her peace with the great open eyes." For now, at last, she has divined the secret of the unwritten book on "human responsibility" and has realised that motherhood means--atonement.

So I read this terrible and beautiful work of art. This, I think, is a meaning inherent in it--not perhaps the meaning, and still less all the meanings. Indeed, its peculiar fascination for me, among all Ibsen's works, lies in the fact that it seems to touch life at so many different points. But I must not be understood as implying that Ibsen constructed the play with any such definitely allegoric design as is here set forth. I do not believe that this creator of men and women ever started from an abstract conception. He did not first compose his philosophic tune and then set his puppets dancing to it. The germ in his mind was dramatic, not ethical; it was only as the drama developed that its meanings dawned upon him; and he left them implicit and fragmentary, like the symbolism of life itself, seldom formulated, never worked out with schematic precision. He simply took a cutting from the tree of life, and, planting it in the rich soil of his imagination, let it ramify and burgeon as it would.

Even if one did not know the date of Little Eyolf, one could confidently assign it to the latest period of Ibsen's career, on noting a certain difference of scale between its foundations and its superstructure. In his earlier plays, down to and including Hedda Gabler, we feel his invention at work to the very last moment, often with more intensity in the last act than in the first; in his later plays he seems to be in haste to pass as early as possible from invention to pure analysis. In this play, after the death of Eyolf (surely one of the most inspired "situations" in all drama) there is practically no external action whatsoever. Nothing happens save in the souls of the characters; there is no further invention, but rather what one may perhaps call inquisition. This does not prevent the second act from being quite the most poignant or the third act from being one of the most moving that Ibsen ever wrote. Far from wishing to depreciate the play, I rate it more highly, perhaps, than most critics--among the very greatest of Ibsen's achievements. I merely note as a characteristic of the poet's latest manner this disparity of scale between the work foreshadowed, so to speak, and the work completed. We shall find it still more evident in the case of John Gabriel Borkman.

Characters

ALFRED ALLMERS, landed proprietor and man of letters
formerly a tutor.

MRS. RITA ALLMERS, his wife.

EYOLF, their child, nine years old.

MISS ASTA ALLMERS, Alfred's younger half-sister.

ENGINEER BORGHEIM.

THE RAT-WIFE.

The action takes place on ALLMERS'S property, bordering on the fjord, twelve or fourteen miles from Christiania.

Act First

[A pretty and richly-decorated garden-room, full of furniture, flowers, and plants. At the back, open glass doors, leading out to a verandah. An extensive view over the fiord. In the distance, wooded hillsides. A door in each of the side walls, the one on the right a folding door, placed far back. In front on the right, a sofa, with cushions and rugs. Beside the sofa, a small table, and chairs. In front, on the left, a larger table, with arm-chairs around it. On the table stands an open hand-bag. It is an early summer morning, with warm sunshine.]

[Mrs. RITA ALLMERS stands beside the table, facing towards the left, engaged in unpacking the bag. She is a handsome, rather tall, well-developed blonde, about thirty years of age, dressed in a light-coloured morning-gown.]

[Shortly after, Miss ASTA ALLMERS enters by the door on the right, wearing a light brown summer dress, with hat, jacket, and parasol. Under her arm she carries a locked portfolio of considerable size. She is slim, of middle height, with dark hair, and deep, earnest eyes. Twenty-five years old.]

ASTA. [As she enters.] Good-morning, my dear Rita.

RITA. [Turns her head, and nods to her.] What! is that you, Asta? Come all the way from town so early?

ASTA. [Takes of her things, and lays them on a chair beside the door.] Yes, such a restless feeling came over me. I felt I must come out to-day, and see how little Eyolf was getting on--and you too. [Lays the portfolio on the table beside the sofa.] So I took the steamer, and here I am.

RITA. [Smiling to her.] And I daresay you met one or other of your friends on board? Quite by chance, of course.

ASTA. [Quietly.] No, I did not meet a soul I knew. [Sees the bag.] Why, Rita, what have you got there?

RITA. [Still unpacking.] Alfred's travelling-bag. Don't you recognise it?

ASTA. [Joyfully, approaching her.] What! Has Alfred come home?

RITA. Yes, only think--he came quite unexpectedly by the late train last night.

ASTA. Oh, then that was what my feeling meant! It was that that drew me out here! And he hadn't written a line to let you know? Not even a post-card?

RITA. Not a single word.

ASTA. Did he not even telegraph?

RITA. Yes, an hour before he arrived--quite curtly and coldly. [Laughs.] Don't you think that was like him, Asta?

ASTA. Yes; he goes so quietly about everything.

RITA. But that made it all the more delightful to have him again.

ASTA. Yes, I am sure it would.

RITA. A whole fortnight before I expected him!

ASTA. And is he quite well? Not in low spirits?

RITA. [Closes the bag with a snap, and smiles at her.] He looked quite transfigured as he stood in the doorway.

ASTA. And was he not the least bit tired either?

RITA. Oh, yes, he seemed to be tired enough--very tired, in fact. But, poor fellow, he had come on foot the greater part of the way.

ASTA. And then perhaps the high mountain air may have been rather too keen for him.

RITA. Oh, no; I don't think so at all. I haven't heard him cough once.

ASTA. Ah, there you see now! It was a good thing, after all, that the doctor talked him into taking this tour.

RITA. Yes, now that it is safely over.--But I can tell you it has been a terrible time for me, Asta. I have never cared to talk about it--and you so seldom came out to see me, too--

ASTA. Yes, I daresay that wasn't very nice of me--but--

RITA. Well, well, well, of course you had your school to attend to in town. [Smiling.] And then our road-maker friend--of course he was away too.

ASTA. Oh, don't talk like that, Rita.

RITA. Very well, then; we will leave the road-maker out of the question.--You can't think how I have been longing for Alfred! How empty the place seemed! How desolate! Ugh, it felt as if there had been a funeral in the house!

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