

Three Dramas

by

Bjornstjerne Bjornson

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Introduction

The three plays here presented were the outcome of a period when Björnson's views on many topics were undergoing a drastic revision and he was abandoning much of his previous orthodoxy in many directions. Two of them were written during, and one immediately after, a three years' absence from Norway--years spent almost entirely in southern Europe. [Note: Further details respecting Björnson's life will be found in the Introduction to Three Comedies by Björnson, published in Everyman's Library in 1912.] For nearly ten years previous to this voluntary exile, Björnson had been immersed in theatrical management and political propagandism. His political activities (guided by a more or less pronounced republican tendency) centred in an agitation for a truer equality between the kingdoms of Sweden and Norway, his point of view being that Norway had come to be regarded too much as a mere appanage of Sweden. Between that and his manifold and distracting cares as theatrical director, he had let imaginative work slide for the time being; but his years abroad had a recuperative effect, and, in addition, broadened his mental outlook in a remarkable manner. Foreign travel, a wider acquaintance with differing types of humanity, and, above all, a newly-won acquaintance with the contemporary literature of other countries, made a deep impression upon Björnson's vigorously receptive mind. He browsed voraciously upon the works of foreign writers. Herbert Spencer, Darwin, John Stuart Mill, Taine, Max-Müller, formed a portion of his mental pabulum at this time--and the result was a significant alteration of mental attitude on a number of questions, and a determination to make the attempt to embody his theories in dramatic form. He had gained all at once, as he wrote to Georg Brandes, the eminent Danish critic, "eyes that saw and ears that heard." Up to this time the poet in him had been predominant; now it was to be the social philosopher that held the reins. Just as Ibsen did, so Björnson abandoned historical drama and artificial comedy for an attempt at prose drama which should have at all events a serious thesis. In this he anticipated Ibsen; for (unless we include the satirical political comedy, *The League of Youth*, which was published in 1869, among Ibsen's "social dramas") Ibsen did not enter the field with *Pillars of Society* [Note: Published in *The Pretenders and Two Other Plays*, in Everyman's Library, 1913.] until 1877, whereas Björnson's *The Editor*, *The Bankrupt*, and *The King* were all published between 1874 and 1877. Intellectual and literary life in Denmark had been a good deal stirred and quickened in the early seventies, and the influence of that awakening was inevitably felt by the more eager spirits in the other Scandinavian countries. It is amusing to note, as one Norwegian writer has pointed out, that this intellectual upheaval (which, in its turn, was a reflection of that taking place in outer Europe) came at a time when the bulk of the Scandinavian folk "were congratulating themselves that the doubt and ferment of unrest which were undermining the foundations of the great communities abroad had not had the power to ruffle the placid surface of our good, old-fashioned, Scandinavian orthodoxy." Björnson makes several sly hits in these plays (as does Ibsen in *Pillars of Society*) at this distrust of the opinions and manners of the larger communities outside of Scandinavia, notably America, with which the Scandinavian countries were more particularly in touch through emigration.

Brandes characterises the impelling motive of these three plays as a passionate appeal for a higher standard of truth--in journalism, in finance, in monarchy: an appeal for less casuistry and more honesty. Such a motive was characteristic of the vehement honesty of Björnson's own character; he must always, as he says in one of his letters, go over to the side of any one whom he believed to "hold the truth in his hands."

The Editor (*Redaktören*) was written while Björnson was in Florence, and was published at Copenhagen in 1874. It was at first not accepted for performance at Christiania or Copenhagen, though an unauthorised performance of it was given at one of the lesser Christiania theatres in 1875. Meanwhile a Swedish version of it had been produced, authoritatively, at Stockholm in February of that year. The play eventually made its way on the Norwegian and Danish stage; but, before that, it had been seen in German dress at Munich and Hamburg. As an inevitable result of his recent activities as a political speaker and pamphleteer, Björnson had come in for a good deal of vituperation in the press, a fact which no doubt added some gall to the ink with which he drew the portrait of the journalist in this play. The Stockholm critics, indeed, had condemned *The Editor* as merely a pamphleteering attack on the editor of a well-known journal. In answer to this criticism Björnson wrote from Rome in March, 1875: "It is said that my play is a pamphleteering attack on a certain individual. That is a deliberate lie. I have studied the journalist type, which is here represented, in many other countries besides my own. The chief characteristic of this type is to be actuated by an inordinate egotism that is perpetually being inflamed by passion; that makes use of bogeys to frighten people, and does this in such a way that, while it makes all its honest contemporaries afraid of any freedom of thought, it also produces the same result on every single individual by means of reckless persecution. As I wished to portray that type, I naturally took a good deal of the portrait from the representative of the type that I knew best; but, like every artist who wishes to produce a complete creation, I had to build it up from separate revelations of itself. There can, therefore, be no question of any individual being represented in my play except in so far as he may partially agree with the type."

However much Björnson may have written *The Editor* with a "purpose," his vivid dramatic sense kept him from becoming merely didactic. The little tragedy that takes place amongst this homely group of people makes quite a moving play, thanks to the skill with which the types are depicted--the bourgeois father and mother, with their mixture of timidity and self-interest; the manly, straightforward young politician, resolute to carry on the work that has sapped his brother's life; the warped, de-humanised nature of the journalist; the sturdy common-sense of the yeoman farmer; and the doctor, the "family friend," as a sort of mocking chorus. Besides its plea for a higher regard for truth, the play also attacks the precept, preached by worldly wisdom, that we ought to harden our natures to make ourselves invulnerable; a proposition which was hateful to one of Björnson's persistently impressionable and ingenuous nature. The fact remains, as Brandes grimly admits, that "nowadays we have only a very qualified sympathy with public characters who succumb to the persecution of the press." Brandes sees in the play, besides its obvious motive, an allegory. Halvdan Rejn, the weary and dying politician, is (he says) meant for Henrik Wergeland, a Norwegian poet-politician who had similar struggles, sank under the weight of similar attacks, died after a long illness, and was far

higher reputed after his death than during his life. In Harald Rejn, with his honest enthusiasm and misjudged political endeavours Brandes sees Björnson himself; while the yeoman brother, Haakon, seems to him to typify the Norwegian people.

The Bankrupt (En Fallit: literally A Bankruptcy) was partly written in Rome, partly in Tyrol, and published at Copenhagen in 1875. It was a thing entirely new to the Scandinavian stage for a dramatist to deal seriously with the tragi-comedy of money, and, while making a forcible plea for honesty, to contrive to produce a stirring and entertaining play on what might seem so prosaic a foundation as business finance. Some of the play's earliest critics dismissed it as "dry," "prosaic," "trivial," because of the nature of its subject; but it made a speedy success on the boards, and very soon became a popular item in the repertoires of the Christiania, Bergen and Copenhagen theatres. It was actually first performed, in a Swedish translation, at Stockholm, a few days before it was produced at Christiania. Very soon, too, the play reached Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and other German and Austrian theatres. It was played in Paris, at the Théâtre Libre in 1894. The character of Berent, the lawyer, which became a favourite one with the famous Swedish actor Ernst Possart, was admittedly more or less of a portrait of a well-known Norwegian lawyer, by name Dunker. When Björnson was writing the play, he went to stay for some days with Dunker, who was to instruct him as to the legal aspect of bankruptcy. Björnson took the opportunity of studying the lawyer as well as the law.

The King (Kongen) was written at Aulestad, the Norwegian home in which Björnson settled after his return from abroad, and was published at Copenhagen in 1877. It is perhaps not surprising that the play, with its curious blend of poetry and social philosophy, and its somewhat exuberant (though always interesting) wordiness, was not at first a conspicuous success on the stage; but the interest aroused by the published book was enormous. It was widely read and vigorously discussed, both in Scandinavia and abroad; and while, on the one hand, it brought upon Björnson the most scurrilous abuse and the harshest criticism from his political opponents, on the other hand a prominent compatriot of his (whose opinion was worth having) gave it as his verdict, at a political meeting held soon after the play's publication, that "the most notable thing that has happened in Norway of late--or at any rate, one of the most notable--in my opinion is this last book of Björnson's--The King."

The idea of a "democratic monarchy"--a kind of reformed constitutional monarchy, that should be a half-way house on the road to republicanism--was not entirely new; Björnson's success was in presenting the problem as seen from the inside--that is to say, from the king's point of view. His opponents, of course, branded him as a red-hot republican, which he was not. In a preface he wrote for a later edition of the play, he says that he did not intend the play mainly as an argument in favour of republicanism, but "to extend the boundaries of free discussion"; but that, at the same time, he believed the republic to be the ultimate form of government, and all European states to be proceeding at varying rates of speed towards it.

The King is composed of curiously incongruous elements. The railway meeting in the first act is pure comedy of a kind to compare with the meeting in Ibsen's An Enemy of

Society_; the last act is melodrama with a large admixture of remarkably interesting social philosophy; the intervening acts betray the poet that always underlay the dramatist in Björnson. The crudity, again, of the melodramatic appearance of the wraith of Clara's father in the third act, contrasts strangely with the mature thoughtfulness of much of the last act and with the tender charm of what has gone before: And--strangest incongruity of all in a play so essentially "actual"--there is in the original, between each act, a mysterious "mellemspil," or "interlude," in verse, consisting of somewhat cryptic dialogues between Genii and Unseen Choirs in the clouds, between an "Old Grey Man" and a "Chorus of Tyrants" in a desolate scene of snow and ice, between Choruses of Men, Women, and Children in a sylvan landscape, and so forth--their utterances being of the nature of the obscurest choruses in the Greek dramatists, but for the most part with a less obvious relevance to the play itself. Such a device leads the present-day reader's thoughts inevitably to the use made of the "unseen chorus," in a similar way, by Thomas Hardy in *The Dynasts*; but Hardy's interludes are closely relevant to his drama and help it on its way, which Björnson's do not. They have been entirely omitted in the present translation, on the ground of their complete superfluity as well as from the extreme difficulty of retaining their "atmosphere" in translation.

None of the three plays in the present volume have previously been translated into English. German, French, and Swedish versions of *The Editor* are extant; German, Swedish, Finnish, French, and Hungarian of *The Bankrupt*; French and Spanish of *The King*.

R. FARQUHARSON SHARP.

The following is a list of the works of Björnstjerne Björnson:--

DRAMATIC AND POETIC WORKS.--*Mellem Slagene* (Between the Battles), 1857. *Halte-Hulda* (Lame Hulda), 1858. *Kong Sverre* (King Sverre), 1861. *Sigurd Slembe* (Sigurd the Bastard), 1862; translated by W. M. Payne, 1888. *Maria Stuart i Skotland*, 1864. *De Nygifte* (The Newly-Married Couple), 1865; translated by T. Soelfeldt, 1868; by S. and E. Hjerleid, 1870; as *A Lesson in Marriage*, by G. I. Colbron, 1911. *Sigurd Jorsalfar* (Sigurd the Crusader), 1872. *Redaktören* (The Editor), 1874. *En Fallit* (A Bankruptcy), 1874. *Kongen* (The King), 1877. *Leonarda*, 1879. *Det ny System* (The New System), 1879. *En Hanske*, 1883; translated as *A Gauntlet*, by H. L. Braekstad 1890; by Osman Edwards 1894. *Over AEvne* (Beyond our Strength), Part I., 1883; translated as *Pastor Sang*, by W. Wilson, 1893; Part II., 1895. *Geografi og Kaerlighed* (Geography and Love), 1885; *Paul Lange og Tora Parsberg*, 1898; translated by H. L. Braekstad, 1899. *Laboremus*, 1901; translation published by Chapman and Hall, 1901. *Paa Storhove* (At Storhove), 1904; *Daglannet*, 1904; *Naar den ny Vin blomstrer* (When the Vineyards are in Blossom), 1909; *The Newly-Married Couple*, *Leonarda*, and *A Gauntlet*, translated by R. Farquharson Sharp (Everyman's Library), 1912.

Digte og Sange (Poems and Songs), 1870; *Arnljot Gelline*, 1870.

FICTION.--Synnöve Solbakken 1857; translated as Trust and Trial, by Mary Howitt, 1858; as Love and Life in Norway, by Hon. Augusta Bethell and A. Plesner, 1870; as The Betrothal, in H. and A. Zimmern's Half-hours with Foreign Novelists, 1880; also translated by Julie Sutter, 1881; by R. B. Anderson, 1881. Arne, 1858; translated by T. Krag, 1861; by A. Plesner and S. Rugeley- Powers, 1866; by R. B. Anderson, 1881; by W. Low (Bohn's Library), 1890. Smaastykker (Sketches), 1860. En glad Gut, 1860; translated as Ovind, by S. and E. Hjerleid 1869; as The Happy Boy, by R. B. Anderson, 1881; as The Happy Lad (published by Blackie), 1882. Fiskerjenten, 1868 translated as The Fisher Maiden, by M. E. Niles, 1869; as The Fishing Girl, by A. Plesner and F. Richardson, 1870; as The Fishing Girl, by S. and E. Hjerleid, 1871; as The Fisher Maiden, by R. B. Anderson, 1882. Brude-Slaatten, 1873; translated as The Bridal March, by R. B. Anderson, 1882; by J. E. Williams, 1893. Fortaellinger (Tales), 1872. Magnhild, 1877; translated by R. B. Anderson, 1883. Kaptejn Mansana, 1879; translated as Captain Mansana by R. B. Anderson, 1882. Det flager i Byen og paa Havnen (Flags are Flying in Town and Port), 1884; translated as The Heritage of the Kurts, by C Fairfax 1892. Paa Guds Veje, 1889; translated as In God's Way, by E. Carmichael, 1890. Nye Fortaellinger (New Tales), 1894; To Fortaelinger (Two Tales), 1901; Mary, 1906. Collected edition of the Novels, translated into English, edited by E. Gosse, 13 vols., 1895-1909.

[See Life of Björnson by W. M. Payne, 1910; E. Gosse's Study of the Writings of Björnson, in edition of Novels, 1895; H. H. Boyesen's Essays on Scandinavian Literature, 1895; G. Brandes' Critical Studies of Ibsen and Björnson, 1899.]

THE EDITOR

A PLAY IN FOUR ACTS

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

EVJE, a prosperous distiller.

MRS. EVJE.

GERTRUD, their daughter, engaged to HARALD REJN.

The DOCTOR.

The EDITOR.

HAAKON REJN, a yeoman farmer.

HALVDAN REJN and HARALD REJN, his brothers.

The DOCTOR'S ASSISTANT.

INGEBORG, maid to the Evjes.

JOHN, coachman to the Evjes.

HALVDAN REJN's HOUSEKEEPER.

HALVDAN REJN's MAID.

A Lamplighter.

The action takes place in a town in Norway.

ACT I

(SCENE.--The breakfast-room at the EVJES' house. A glass-cupboard, in two partitions, stands against the left-hand wall, well forward. On the top of it stand a variety of objects. Beyond it, a stove. At the back of the room, a sideboard. In the middle of the room a small round folding table, laid for four persons. There is an armchair by the stove; a sofa on the right; chairs, etc. A door at the back of the room, and another in the left-hand wall. There are paintings on the walls, and the general impression of the room is one of snug comfort. EVJE, MRS. EVJE, and GERTRUD are seated at the table. INGEBORG is standing by the sideboard. Breakfast is proceeding in silence as the curtain rises. INGEBORG takes away EVJE'S cup and re-fills it. As she brings it back to him, a ring is heard at the bell. GERTRUD gets up.)

Evje. Sit still; John will go to the door. (GERTRUD sits down again. Directly afterwards, another ring is heard.)

Mrs. Evje. What can John be doing?

Ingeborg. I will go. (Goes out. She comes back, showing in HARALD REJN, who hangs up his hat and coat in the hall before coming in.)

Harald. Good morning!

Evje and Mrs. Evje. Good morning! (HARALD shakes hands with them.)

Harald (to GERTRUD, who is sitting on the right). Good morning, Gertrud! Am I a bit late to-day? (GERTRUD, who has taken his hand, looks lovingly at him but says nothing.)

Mrs. Evje. Yes, I suppose you have been for a long constitutional, although the weather is none of the best.

Harald. It is not; I expect we shall have a thick fog by the afternoon.

Evje. Did you have breakfast before you went out?

Harald. I did, thanks. (To INGEBORG, who has come forward with a cup of coffee.) No, thank you. I will sit down here while you are finishing. (Sits down on the sofa behind GERTRUD.)

Mrs. Evje. How is your brother Halvdan?

Harald. A little better to-day, thanks--but of course we cannot build on that.

Evje. Is your eldest brother coming to see him?

Harald. Yes, we expect him every day. Probably his wife has come with him, and that has been the reason of the delay; she finds it difficult to get away.

Mrs. Evje. Halvdan so often talks of her.

Harald. Yes, I believe she is the best friend he has.

Evje. No wonder, then, that she wants to come and say good-bye to him. By the way, have you seen how the paper bids him good-bye to-day?

Harald. Yes, I have seen it.

Mrs. Evje (hurriedly). I hope Halvdan has not seen it?

Harald (smiling). No, it is a long time now since Halvdan read a newspaper. (A pause.)

Evje. Then I suppose you have read what they say about you too?

Harald. Naturally.

Mrs. Evje. It is worse than anything they have said about you before.

Harald. Well--of course, you know, my election meeting comes on this evening.

Evje. I can tell you it has upset us.

Mrs. Evje. Day after day we wake up to find our house invaded by these abominations. That is a nice thought to begin your day's work with!

Harald. Is it so indispensable, then, to educated people to begin their day by reading such things?

Mrs. Evje. Well--one must have a paper.

Evje. And most people read it. Besides, one can't deny that a lot of what is in it is true, although its general tendency is to run everyone down.

Harald (getting up). Quite so, yes. (Leans over GERTRUD'S shoulder.) Gertrud, have you read it?

Gertrud (does not look at him, and hesitates for a moment; then says gently): Yes.

Harald (under his breath). So that is it! (Walks away from her.)

Evje. We have had a little bit of a scene here, I must tell you.

Harald (walking up and down). Yes, I can understand that.

Evje. I will repeat what I have said already: they write about you, and we have to suffer for it.

Mrs. Evje. Yes, and Gertrud especially.

Gertrud. No--I don't want anyone to consider me in the matter at all. Besides, it is not what they say of you in the paper that hurts me--. (Stops abruptly.)

Harald (who has come up to her). But what your parents are feeling about it? Is that it? (GERTRUD does not answer.)

Evje (pushing back his plate). There, I have finished! (They rise from the table. MRS. EVJE helps INGEBORG to clear away the things, which INGEBORG carries out of the room.)

Mrs. Evje. Couldn't you wash your hands of politics, Harald? (GERTRUD goes out to the left.)

Evje (who has followed GERTRUD with his eyes). We cannot deny that it pains us considerably that in our old age our peaceful home should be invaded by all this squabbling and abomination.

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