

Three Comedies

by

Bjornstjerne Bjornson

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Introduction

BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSSON--poet, dramatist, novelist, and politician, and the most notable figure in contemporary Norwegian history-- was born, in December 1832, at Kvikne in the north of Norway. His father was pastor at Kvikne, a remote village in the Österdal district, some sixty miles south of Trondhjem; a lonely spot, whose atmosphere and surroundings Björnson afterwards described in one of his short sketches ("Blakken"). The pastor's house lay so high up on the "fjeld" that corn would not grow on its meadows, where the relentless northern winter seemed to begin so early and end so late. The Österdal folk were a wild, turbulent lot in those days--so much so, that his predecessor (who had never ventured into the church without his pistol in his pocket) had eventually run away and flatly refused to return, with the result that the district was pastorless for some years until the elder Björnson came to it.

It was in surroundings such as this, and with scarcely any playfellows, that Björnstjerne Björnson spent the first six years of his life; and the sturdy independence of his nature may have owed something to the unaccommodating life of his earliest days, just as the poetical impulse that was so strong in his developed character probably had its beginnings in the impressions of beauty he received in the years that immediately followed. For, when he was six, a welcome change came. His father was transferred to the tranquil pastorate of Naes, at the mouth of the Romsdal, one of the fairest spots in Norway. Here Björnson spent the rest of his childhood, in surroundings of beauty and peacefulness, going to school first at Molde and afterwards at Christiania, to pass on later to the Christiania University where he graduated in 1852. As a boy, his earliest biographer tells us, he was fully determined to be a poet--and, naturally, the foremost poet of his time!--but, as years passed, he gained a soberer estimate of his possibilities. At the University he was one of a group of kindred spirits with eager literary leanings, and it did not take him long to gain a certain footing in the world of journalism. His work for the first year or two was mainly in the domain of dramatic criticism, but the creative instinct was growing in him. A youthful effort of his--a drama entitled Valborg--was actually accepted for production at the Christiania theatre, and the author, according to custom, was put on the "free list" at once. The experience he gained, however, by assiduous attendance at the theatre so convinced him of the defects in his own bantling, that he withdrew it before performance--a heroic act of self-criticism rare amongst young authors.

His first serious literary efforts were some peasant tales, whose freshness and vividness made an immediate and remarkable impression and practically ensured his future as a writer, while their success inspired him with the desire to create a kind of peasant "saga." He wrote of what he knew, and a delicate sense of style seemed inborn in him. The best known of these tales are Synnöve Solbakken (1857) and Arne (1858). They were hailed as giving a revelation of the Norwegian character, and the first-named was translated into English as early as 1858. He was thus made known to (or, at any rate, accessible to) English readers many years before Ibsen, though his renown was subsequently

overshadowed, out of their own country, by the enormous vogue of the latter's works. Ibsen, too, has been far more widely translated (and is easier to translate) into English than Björnson. Much of the latter's finest work, especially in his lyrical poetry and his peasant stories, has a charm of diction that it is almost impossible to reproduce in translation. Ibsen and Björnson, who inevitably suggest comparison when either's work is dealt with, were closely bound by friendship as well as admiration until a breach was caused by Björnson's taking offence at a supposed attack on him in Ibsen's early play *The League of Youth*, Björnson considering himself to be lampooned in the delineation of one of the characters thereof. The breach, however, was healed many years later, when, at the time of the bitter attacks that were made upon Ibsen in consequence of the publication of *Ghosts*, Björnson came into the field of controversy with a vigorous and generous championing of his rival.

Björnson's dramatic energies, as was the case with Ibsen in his early days, first took the form of a series of historical dramas --*Sigurd Slembe*, *Konge Sverre*, and others; and he was intimately connected with the theatre by being for two periods theatrical director, from 1857 to 1859 at Bergen and from 1865 to 1867 at Christiania. Previous to the latter engagement a stipend granted to him by the Norwegian government enabled him to travel for two or three years in Europe; and during those years his pen was never idle--poems, prose sketches, and tales flowing from it in abundance. *De Nygifte* (*The Newly-Married Couple*), the first of the three plays in the present volume, was produced at the Christiania theatre in the first year of his directorship there.

The two volumes, *Digte og Sange* (*Poems and Songs*) and *Arnljot Gelline*, which comprise the greater proportion of Björnson's poetry, both appeared in 1870. *Digte og Sange* was republished, in an enlarged edition, ten years later. It contains the poem "Ja, vi elsker dette Landet" ("Yes, we love this land of ours"), which, set to inspiring music by Nordraak, became Norway's most favourite national song, as well as another of the same nature-- "Fremad! Fremad!" ("Forward! Forward!")--which, sung to music of Grieg's, ran it hard in popularity. Of "Ja, vi elsker dette Landet," Björnson used to say that the greatest tribute he had ever had to its hold upon his fellow-countrymen's hearts was when, on one occasion during the poet's years of vigorous political activity, a crowd of fervid opponents came and broke his windows with stones; after which, turning to march away triumphantly, they felt the need (ever present to the Scandinavian in moments of stress) of singing, and burst out with one accord into the "Ja, vi elsker dette Landet" of their hated political adversary. "They couldn't help it; they had to sing it!" the poet used to relate delightedly.

Of the birth of "Fremad! Fremad!" Grieg has left an account which gives an amusing picture of the infectious enthusiasm that was one of Björnson's strongest characteristics. Grieg had given him, as a Christmas present, the first series of his "Lyrical Pieces" for the pianoforte, and had afterwards played some of them to the poet, who was especially struck with one melody which Grieg had called "Fadrelandssang" ("Song of the Fatherland"). Björnson there and then, to the composer's great gratification, protested that he must write words to fit the air. (It must be mentioned that each strophe of the melody starts with a refrain consisting of two strongly accented notes, which suggest some

vigorous dissyllabic word.) A day or two later Grieg met Björnson, who was in the full throes of composition, and exclaimed to him that the song was going splendidly, and that he believed all the youth of Norway would adopt it enthusiastically; but that he was still puzzled over the very necessary word to fit the strongly marked refrain. However, he was not going to give it up. Next morning, when Grieg was in his room peacefully giving a piano lesson to a young lady, a furious ringing was heard at his front-door bell, as if the ringer would tear the bell from its wires, followed by a wild shout of "'Fremad! Fremad!' Hurrah, I have got it! 'Fremad!'" Björnson, for of course the intruder was he, rushed into the house the moment the maid's trembling fingers could open the door, and triumphantly chanted the completed song to them, over and over again, amidst a din of laughter and congratulations.

His first experiments in the "social drama," plays dealing with the tragedies and comedies of every-day life in his own country, were made at about the same time as Ibsen's; that is to say, in the seventies. Björnson's first successes in that field, which made him at once a popular dramatist, were *Redaktören* (The Editor) in 1874 and *En Fallit* (A Bankruptcy) in 1875. The latter especially was hailed as the earliest raising of the veil upon Norwegian domestic life, and as a remarkable effort in the detection of drama in the commonplace. Before he wrote these, Björnson had again been for some years out of Norway; and, as in the case of Ibsen, who began the writing of his "social dramas" when in voluntary exile, absence seemed to enable him to observe the familiar from a new standpoint and in the proper perspective.

After his first successes in this line, when his plays (and his poems and tales to an equal extent) had made him popular and honoured among his own people, Björnson settled at Aulestad, which remained his home for the rest of his life. He also became a doughty controversialist in social and religious matters, and the first outcome of this phase was his play *Leonarda* (the second in this volume), which was first performed in 1879, to be followed by *Det ny System* (The New System) later in the same year. These works aroused keen controversy, but were not such popular stage successes as his earlier plays. Moreover, about this time, on his return from a visit to America, he plunged into the vortex of political controversy as an aggressive radical. He was a vigorous and very persuasive orator; and in that capacity, as well as in that of writer of political articles and essays, was an uncompromising foe to the opportunist theories which he held to be degrading the public life of his country. The opposition he aroused by his fearless championship of whatever he considered a rightful cause was so bitter that he was eventually obliged to retire from Norway for two or three years. So much did this temporarily affect his literary reputation at home, that when, in 1883, he had written *En Hanske* (A Gauntlet--the third play here translated) he found at first considerable difficulty in getting it performed. Later, however, he became a political hero to a large section of his compatriots, and by degrees won back fully the place he had occupied in their hearts. He enthusiastically espoused the cause of the projected separation from Sweden, though when that matter came to a crisis he exercised an invaluable influence on the side of moderation.

For the remainder of his life he continued to be prolific in literary production, with an ever increasing renown amongst European men of letters, and an ever deepening personal hold upon the affections of his fellow-countrymen. In 1903 he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature. During his later years he, like Ibsen, was a determined opponent of the movement to replace the Dano-Norwegian language, which had hitherto been the literary vehicle of Norwegian writers, by the "Bonde-Maal"--or "Ny Norsk" ("New Norwegian"), as it has lately been termed. This is an artificial hybrid composed from the Norwegian peasant dialects, by the use of which certain misguided patriots were (and unfortunately still are) anxious to dissociate their literature from that of Denmark. Björnson, and with him most of the soberer spirits amongst Norwegian writers, had realised that the door which had so long shut out Norway from the literature of Europe must be, as he put it, opened from the inside; and he rightly considered that the ill-judged "Bonde-Maal" movement could only have the result of wedging the door more tightly shut.

He died, in April 1910, in Paris, where for some years he had always spent his winters, and was buried at home with every mark of honour and regret, a Norwegian warship having been sent to convey his remains back to his own land.

He was a man of very lovable personality and of the kindest heart; easily moved by any tale of oppression or injustice, and of wide-armed (albeit sometimes in judicious) generosity; more apt, in the affairs of everyday life, to be governed by his heart than by his head, and as simple as a child in many matters. His wife was an ideal helpmate to him, and their family life very happy.

The Newly-Married Couple (1865) offers a considerable contrast to the other two plays here presented. It belongs to the school of Scribe and the "soliloquy," and the author avails himself of the recognised dramatic conventions of the day. At the same time, though the characters may be conventional in type, they are, thanks to Björnson's sense of humour, alive; and the theme of the estrangement and reconciliation of the "newly-married couple" is treated with delicacy and charm. It is true that it is almost unbelievable that the hero could be so stupid as to allow the "confidante" to accompany his young wife when he at last succeeds in wresting her from her parents' jealous clutches; but, on the other hand, that lady, with her anonymous novel that revealed the truth to the young couple, was necessary to the plot as a "dea ex machina." The play was, and is, immensely popular on the Scandinavian stage, and still holds the boards on others. It has been translated into Swedish, German, English, Dutch, Italian, Polish and Finnish.

Leonarda (1879) marks just as striking an advance upon Björnson's early plays as the first of Ibsen's "social dramas" did upon his. Unreal stage conventions have disappeared, the characterisation is convincing, and the dialogue, if more prolix than Ibsen's (as is throughout the case with Björnson), is always interesting and individual. The emotional theme of the play, the love of an older woman for her adopted daughter's young lover, is treated with the poetic touch that pervades all Björnson's work; and the controversial theme, that of religious tolerance, with a sane restraint. It cannot be denied, however, that Björnson's changed and unorthodox attitude towards religious matters--an attitude little

expected except by those who knew him best--contributed a good deal towards the temporary waning of his popularity at this time. *Leonarda* is (like *A Gauntlet*) a good example of the root difference between Björnson's and Ibsen's treatment of problems in their dramas. Ibsen contented himself with diagnosing social maladies; Björnson's more genial nature hints also at the remedy, or at least at a palliative. Ibsen is a stern judge; Björnson is, beyond that, a prophet of better things. Whereas Ibsen is first and foremost a dramatist, Björnson is rather by instinct the novelist who casts his ideas in dramatic form, and is concerned to "round up" the whole. As Brandes says, in the course of his sympathetic criticism of the two writers, "Ibsen is in love with the idea, and its psychological and logical consequences. ... Corresponding to this love of the abstract idea in Ibsen, we have in Björnson the love of humankind." Björnson, moreover, was a long way behind Ibsen in constructive skill. As regards the technical execution of *Leonarda*, its only obvious weakness is a slight want of vividness in the presentation of the thesis. The hiatuses between the acts leave perhaps too much to the imagination, and the play needs more than a cursory reading for us to grasp the full import of the actions and motives of its personages. *Leonarda* has not been previously translated into English; though Swedish, French, German and Finnish versions of it exist.

A Gauntlet (finished in 1883) shows a great advance in dramatic technique. The whole is closely knit and coherent, and the problems involved are treated with an exhaustiveness that is equally fair to both sides. As has been already said, the plays that had preceded it from Björnson's pen aroused such active controversy that he found it at first impossible to get *A Gauntlet* produced in his own country. Its first performance was in Hamburg, in 1883, and for that the author modified and altered it greatly. Eventually it was played, in its original form, in the Scandinavian countries, and in its turn stirred up a bitter controversy on the ethics of male and female morality as regards marriage. It was currently said that hundreds of contemplated marriages were broken off in Norway as an effect of its statement of a vital problem. The remodelling the play originally underwent for its performance in Germany was drastic. The second and third acts were entirely recast, the character of Dr. Nordan was omitted and others introduced, and the ending was changed. The first version was, however, evidently the author's favourite, and it is that that is presented here. Björnson never published the recast version, and in the "memorial edition" of his works it is the present version that is given. The recast version was translated into English by Mr. Osman Edwards and produced (in an "adapted" and mangled form, for which the translator was not responsible) at the Royalty Theatre in London in 1894.

R. FARQUHARSON SHARP.

THE NEWLY-MARRIED COUPLE

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The FATHER.

The MOTHER.

LAURA, their daughter.

AXEL, her husband.

MATHILDE, her friend.

THE NEWLY-MARRIED COUPLE

ACT I

(SCENE.--A handsomely furnished, carpeted room, with a door at the back leading to a lobby. The FATHER is sitting on a couch on the left-hand side, in the foreground, reading a newspaper. Other papers are lying on a small table in front of him. AXEL is on another couch drawn up in a similar position on the right-hand side. A newspaper, which he is not reading, is lying on his knee. The MOTHER is sitting, sewing, in an easy-chair drawn up beside a table in the middle of the room.)

[LAURA enters.]

Laura. Good morning, mother! (Kisses her.)

Mother. Good morning, dear. Have you slept well?

Laura. Very well, thanks. Good morning, dad! (Kisses him.)

Father. Good morning, little one, good morning. Happy and in good spirits?

Laura. Very. (Passes in front of AXEL.) Good morning, Axel! (Sits down at the table, opposite her mother.)

Axel. Good morning.

Mother. I am very sorry to say, my child, that I must give up going to the ball with you to-night. It is such a long way to go, in this cold spring weather.

Father (without looking up from his paper). Your mother is not well. She was coughing in the night.

Laura. Coughing again?

Father. Twice. (The MOTHER coughs, and he looks up.) There, do you hear that? Your mother must not go out, on any account.

Laura. Then I won't go, either.

Father. That will be just as well; it is such raw weather. (To the MOTHER.) But you have no shawl on, my love; where is your shawl?

Laura. Axel, fetch mother's shawl; it is hanging in the lobby. (AXEL goes out into the lobby.)

Mother. We are not really into spring yet. I am surprised the stove is not lit in here.

Laura (to AXEL, who is arranging the shawl over the MOTHER'S shoulders). Axel, ring the bell and let us have a fire. (He does so, and gives the necessary instructions to the Servant.)

Mother. If none of us are going to the ball, we ought to send them a note. Perhaps you would see to that, Axel?

Axel. Certainly--but will it do for us to stay away from this ball?

Laura. Surely you heard father say that mother has been coughing in the night.

Axel. Yes, I heard; but the ball is being given by the only friend I have in these parts, in your honour and mine. We are the reason of the whole entertainment--surely we cannot stay away from it?

Laura. But it wouldn't be any pleasure to us to go without mother.

Axel. One often has to do what is not any pleasure.

Laura. When it is a matter of duty, certainly. But our first duty is to mother, and we cannot possibly leave her alone at home when she is ill.

Axel. I had no idea she was ill.

Father (as he reads). She coughed twice in the night. She coughed only a moment ago.

Mother. Axel means that a cough or two isn't illness, and he is quite right.

Father (still reading). A cough may be a sign of something very serious. (Clears his throat.) The chest--or the lungs. (Clears his throat again.) I don't think I feel quite the thing myself, either.

Laura. Daddy dear, you are too lightly clothed.

Mother. You dress as if it were summer--and it certainly isn't that.

Father. The fire will burn up directly. (Clears his throat again.) No, not quite the thing at all.

Laura. Axel! (He goes up to her.) You might read the paper to us till breakfast is ready.

Axel. Certainly. But first of all I want to know if we really are not to go to the ball?

Laura. You can go, if you like, and take our excuses.

Mother. That wouldn't do. Remember you are married now.

Axel. That is exactly why it seems to me that Laura cannot stay at home. The fact that she is my wife ought to have most weight with her now; and this ball is being given for us two, who have nothing the matter with us, besides being mainly a dance for young people--

Mother. And not for old folk.

Laura. Thank you; mother has taken to dancing again since I have grown up. I have never been to a ball without mother's leading off the dances.

Mother. Axel apparently thinks it would have been much better if I had not done so.

Father (as he reads). Mother dances most elegantly.

Axel. Surely I should know that, seeing how often I have had the honour of leading off with mother. But on this occasion forty or fifty people have been invited, a lot of trouble and expense incurred and a lot of pleasure arranged, solely for our sakes. It would be simply wicked to disappoint them.

Father (still reading). We can give a ball for them, in return.

Mother. All the more as we owe heaps of people an invitation.

Laura. Yes, that will be better; we have more room here, too. (A pause.)

Axel (leaning over LAURA'S chair). Think of your new ball dress-- my first present to you. Won't that tempt you? Blue muslin, with silver stars all over it? Shall they not shine for the first time to-night?

Laura (smiling). No, there would be no shine in the stars if mother were not at the dance.

Axel. Very well--I will send our excuses. (Turns to go out.)

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