

Our English Page

Literary notes from Sweden.

By Ellen Lundberg-Nyblom.

Conclusion.

Hjalmar Bergman has brought to Swedish fiction writing a new and personal note. He has written novels, short stories, and especially plays: 'The Family Swedenhielm' (Swedenhielms; Bonnier, 1925) and 'The Pack' (Patsket; Bonnier, 1928). His style is impassioned, and his figures are sometimes so original that they seem scarcely to have a material existence, but to belong to a somewhat fantastic world. Even when his scene is laid in a quiet little old-fashioned town, the atmosphere has something dreamlike about it, and the most ordinary character takes on a queer physiognomy, sharply drawn though it is, as if etched on opaque glass. As you see and hear his characters, their actions are dramatic, even violent, their attitudes accentric, and their voices sometimes shout in strident tones and sometimes whisper furtively. Their tragic feelings seem more intense than those of ordinary people, and their humor has a wider scope. They gesticulate, weep, love, hate, and die in a sort of frenzy which reminds one at times of old Italian marionettes, controlled by a powerful unseen hand.

'The Pack' is an original play in four acts — a play about Jews. A Jewish family comes to live in the house of a relative, an old antiquary who does not in the least desire their presence. They have made a long journey across the sea, to find the house empty. Rosenstam, the old antiquary, has disappeared before their arrival, ordering his young maid to close the door in their faces if they insist upon entering. But the girl feels sorry for the old couple, and their talkative son, Joe Meng, impresses her. She admits them, and they are soon perfectly at home. The girl tells them, as she has been instructed to do, that her master has left because he is short of money and cannot even pay the rent of the old house. Joe immediately pays the rent and is soon the master of the situation. His young daughter, Mary, and a nephew, Felix, complete the family. Joe Meng begins to carry on his uncle's business, sincerely wishing to make good. But he has not slightest understanding of the business. He sells blindly and is always afraid of being cheated. When, one day, his daughter disappears, apparently in the company of a young count who has visited the shop a little too often, Joe falls into a black pit of despair and indecision. He ought to call in the police to search for his daughter, but he does not dare. His strong feeling for tradition

would not be good for his credit in a new town. He is tortured by his indecision, and he calls to God to help him against his enemies. An old porter comes to give him some news of his daughter, but Joe haughtily pretends that everything is all right. Finally he begins to talk so queerly that the porter throws him a rope which he has in his hand, and exclaims: "Go and hang yourself". Another visit makes Joe wild. Then comes the count with old Rosenstam, who cannot refrain from sneaking about. Joe pretends not to recognize the old man and tells him some rather harsh truths. But when he asks the count about Mary, the latter does not answer. Joe goes mad. When they have gone out and closed the shop door, he fires his Browning after them. In a moment the shop is full of people screaming: "The Jew! The Jew! Kill him. Kill him!"

Mad with fear, Joe takes the rope and rushes up the stairs to the attic with the intention of hanging himself. The crowd enters, screaming, the porter at the head of them. He climbs the attic stairs to pursue Joe, but a moment later he stumbles out of the door again and down the stairs, completely agitated. The Jew has hanged himself. And silently the crowd fades away, frightened by the tragic atmosphere of the old house.

But Joe has hanged himself only in effigy. Once in the attic he repented his rash decision. He made a dummy of some old clothes stuffed with hay and suspended it by the rope from the rafters. He himself lay hidden in a box full of soiled clothes, and there he lay, pondering on life, when he was not sleeping.

After Joe's return to life, old Rosenstam appears again, bringing with him Mary, whom he has sheltered under his own roof since she left home. He repents of his inhospitable conduct toward his relatives and is enchanted by the music of the young violinist, Felix who bids fair to become a good son of Israel. The play ends with the engagement of the two young people, Mary and Felix, and with a touching and rather sentimental scene between Joe and his old mother.

The interesting thing about this play, which has not much of a plot, is the declination of Jewish character — that mingling of a stern sense of justice and duty with an insatiable greed for money, and the ever present suspicion that one is being cheated. The strong feeling for tradition

and family ties, and the urge to manage the affairs of one's relatives as if they were one's own; sentiment mingled with cold calculation, impulsive feelings, love, pride and furtive shyness; and underneath all this the fear of being laughed at, despised, persecuted and hated — all form a conglomerate of the most heterogeneous qualities, at once attractive and repellent. Another play of Bergman's which is well known and often produced is 'Swedenhielms'. It is very good on the stage, where it appears in its proper form, giving a vital picture of an old Swedish family, aristocratic, sunk in debt, rather shabby, but highly intelligent, living on hopes and — loans.

The father of the family is an eminent engineer, and when the play opens he is on the list of names proposer for the Nobel Prize, because of an important invention of his. If he gets the prize, the money will put the whole family on its feet. To his own great amazement, he does get the prize. But, on the very day that he is to receive it, a money lender, whom he has known as an office boy and whom his father had once sent to jail for theft, appears with some unpaid notes of his, among which are two bearing old Swedenhielm's name. The signatures are forged. Obviously it is the work of one of the two boys. Swedenhielm is completely crushed. When the money lender has gone he retires to his room and refuses to go to the Academy to receive the prize. He confronts his youngest son with what he has discovered, and the son pretends that he is guilty to save his elder brother, whom he believes to be the culprit. At this moment Swedenhielm's old sister-in-law steps forward. It is she who keeps the house going, though the family treats her with nonchalant neglect. She confesses frankly that she, and nobody else, has forged the notes. Why? Naturally to make it possible for her brother-in-law to procure the needed materials for his laboratory, to give him nourishing food so that he may work undisturbed by too much worry. "Put me in the cell", she says quietly. "Put me in the cell!"

But old Swedenhielm understands her sacrifice and is deeply moved. He hugs her and goes out, followed by the other members of the family, to hurry and receive his prize. The old sister-in-law takes her coffee cup and sits down to sip it contentedly. By her side she has placed a heavy cane. With that she will probably greet the money lender, who is to come later in the day to get his money. "He is welcome", is her last word.

A little collection of short stories by Hjalmar Bergman appeared at Christmas, 1929, some of them very characteristic and with original themes. "Can you Cure Me, Doctor?" is the most interesting among them. But it seems to me that the stage is Bergman's proper element, and his many plays show his preference for this most vital of all literary forms.

A toadstool is a thing that looks like a mushroom, and if you eat it you die and you know it is not a mushroom.

Life's Purpose

There lies a purpose, back of life's strange ways: Something, or Someone, wiser much than we, Is holding worlds in thought, and lives in awe. And making sense of all its mystery.

We are not puppets in the hands of fate. But workers in the all-embracing plan. We help to make or mar (not ours alone) But lives of those we call our fellow man. Then since our thoughts, our words, our acts Are like the light, or shadows, cast on Life's great picture page To impress plastic minds with thoughts of good; Or wrong, no panacea can assuage.

Walk softly! Heed! Be careful not to hurt A living creature, striving for the Light. Lest like the boomerang, our thoughts return To crush ourselves, with all their cruel might. Far rather, let our light so shine, That others seeing, may, too find the road, That draws us upward, to the One Who guides And leads us all to His own safe Abode.

— Dorothy Sproule.

Two Rules

There are two great rules of life, the one general and the other particular. The first is that everyone can in the end get what he wants if he only tries. This is the general rule. The particular rule is that every individual is more or less an exception of the general rule.

OUR LIVELIHOOD.

A man may pay too dearly for his livelihood, by giving in Thoreau's terms, his whole life for it, or, in mine, bartering for it the whole of his available liberty, and becoming a slave till death. There are two questions to be considered — the quality of what we buy and the price we have to pay for it. Do you want a thousand a year, a two thousand a year, or a ten thousand a year livelihood? And can you afford the one you want? It is a matter of taste; it is not in the least degree a question of duty, though common sense supposed so. But there is no authority for that view anywhere. It is nowhere in the Bible. It is true that we might do a vast amount of good if we were wealthy, but it is also highly improvable. Not many do; and the art of growing rich is not only quite distinct from that of doing good, but the practice of the one does not at all train a man for practising the other.

— R. L. Stevenson.

THE FUTURE.

We live in an age when to be young and to be indifferent can be no longer synonymous. We must prepare for the coming hour. The claim of the future are represented by suffering millions; and the youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity.

THE SMALLEST UNTRUTH

Nothing pains me more than injustice, no matter who endures it, myself or another. It grieves me to see somebody excuse a little child who is unjust or in the wrong. The smallest untruth offends me.

Is this a fault? My father loves me too dearly to criticize me or find any fault in me. To judge another fairly the eye must not be too near nor too far off. It is a duty to one's self to try and make perfect what one loves. — Engelle De Guerin.

MODESTY.

I do not think any man of modesty or thoughtfulness will ever speak contemptuously of any religion, in which God has allowed one good man to die, trusting. — Ethics of the Dust.

A CHEERFUL FACE.

Next to the sunlight of heaven is the cheerful face. Who has not felt its electrifying influence? One glance at this face lifts us out of the mists and shadows into the beautiful bright and warm within. A host of evil passions may lurk around the door, but they never enter and abide there; the cheerful face will put them to shame and flight.

BENEFITS.

There is not any benefit so glorious in itself but it may yet be exceedingly sweetened and improved by the manner of conferring it. The virtue I know rests in the intent; the profit in the judicious application of the matter; but the beauty and ornament of an obligation lies in the manner of it.

DUTY.

Duty looks at life as a debt to be paid; love sees life as a debt to be collected. Duty is constantly paying assessments; love is constantly counting its premiums.

SINCERITY.

We ourselves are the real word, the life utterance which speech often falsifies. There are faces which never deceive nor mislead us. A spiritual nature can but be frank and honest, because its foundation-stones are laid in the truth, and it knows that nothing else holds. It is in us as human beings instinctively to recognize and hate insincerity. Nobody is in the end deceived by expression which is merely outward and perfunctory. Our inner life is transparent; it cannot conceal itself; if it is a true life, it has no need or desire of concealment. — Lucy Larcom.

SUFFERING.

Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seamed with scars; martyrs have put on their coronation robes glittering with fire; and through their tears have the sorrowful first seen the gates of Heaven.

Co-eds are stated to be two inches taller, on the average, than they were fifty years ago. Stocking feet?