

# THE BOOKMAN

A REVIEW OF BOOKS AND LIFE

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## STRINDBERG AND HIS PLAYS

BY VANCE THOMPSON

AUGUST STRINDBERG—the greatest dramatist of his generation, the most tragic figure in modern literature—was a man who was hounded all his life by gods and by devils who had the faces of woman—a tragic man.

First of all I shall try and show what kind of a man he was—what he looked like—as he went the way of life. For the Great Truth is this: Every man is exactly what he looks!

It was in the later nineties and the early part of this century that I knew Strindberg. Those were the years when he walked in the shadow. A few years before he had known glory—he had stood, like a statue in a public square, with the light and crowd all around him. His plays held the theatres of Paris—three of them at one time. For the first and only time in his life, he was rich in money and applause. He had a pleasant house in the Quartier de Passy—a young and gentle wife, a pretty baby. At the Café Napolitain in the Boulevard des Italiennes—where the men of letters used to gather in those days: Catulle Mendès, Anatole

France, Ernest La Jeunesse, Réthé, Richepin, Henri de Regnier—all the successful writers of the day—Strindberg held his little court. Days of glory! I did not know him in that proud moment; and it lasted but a little while.

The first time I saw him was in a little *crémèrie* in the Boulevard Raspail. Anyone of you who has ever known the *quartier Latin* knows it well—a huddled, noisy little restaurant where the students and girls of the Quarter dined for a few pence and (sometimes) paid.

I had gone there to see a boisterous painter of my friends—then a poor, wild Bohemian; to-day the greatest of American landscape painters in France, John Noble. Noble was not there and I sat down at a table and waited. A little model, whom everyone knew and everyone painted, came and kept me company. Her name was Minna. She was a silly, romping little girl, rather amusing.

The *crémèrie* was full of noise and laughter. Over in a corner sat one

man—alone and gloomy. He was dressed in shabby, black clothes and crouched with his face in his hands—so you could see only a mop of grouse-coloured hair.

Minna was a little tipsy, and she began to bombard him with bread. He stood up and looked about him in a dazed way; and Minna, laughing, ran over and threw herself in his arms and kissed him.

It was just her hoidenish way of being merry.

The man pushed her off; and stood there—in the babbling, noisy restaurant—and so you may see him! He was tall and lean and haggard, with staring eyes and a tortured face—he looked like a man who had come from hell and he was August Strindberg. He gave a harsh cry and rushed out of the *crêmerie*, pursued by jeers and screams of derisive laughter. He was not sober.

A few days later I saw him. You know how it is.

There are two streets; you hesitate which one you shall take—and you turn to the right. Then, strolling idly on, you come face to face with a woman—and your whole life is changed. Had you gone through the other street nothing had happened. So this day—*by the chance which is not chance*—I passed the brasserie des Lilas.

It was an afternoon in May, and there on the terrace, alone at a table, Strindberg sat brooding over a glass of absinthe.

I took a seat at his table and told him who I was, for we had many friends in common—notably Sinding, the sculptor. So we talked. And he said:

“Do you know an American named Schlatter?”

Schlatter!

You remember what we said? The great truth—the only truth needed to take you through life—is that every man is exactly what he *looks!* Let me tell you what Strindberg looked like as he leaned over the table and asked me if I knew *Schlatter*. He was dressed, as I have said, in a shabby, cheap and ill-fitting suit of black—with dubious linen and a black shoestring sort of necktie. His hat was off and what struck me most was his hair. It must have been blonde in youth, but now it had become grouse-coloured like that of most middle-aged Swedes. It stood up—four inches above his scalp—and with his tortured and haggard face—he gave you the impression of a man who had been held up by the hair of his head and swung to and fro over an abyss.

His eyes were pale. There was a wild and fleeting look of agony in them. A long face, with high cheekbones, an immense forehead, a nose that broadened at the tip, with flaring nostrils; and under it, shaded by a little, flat moustache, a mouth like a woman's mouth—a sad, tender, unhappy mouth with bluish lips.

This was August Strindberg, as he leaned across the table that Paris afternoon—his bony, spatulate fingers nervously interlocked.

“Do you know an American named Schlatter?”

I had heard of such a man. You may have heard of such a man. I think it was in Denver that he appeared—twenty years ago—as a “healer.” Thousands of vague dupes followed him and for a while the stories of his “cures” and his eccentricities and his “spiritual mission” filled the newspapers. And then, of a sud-

den, he disappeared. His mad disciples sought him world-over—in cities and in the desert; but Schlatter, the “healer,” had vanished.

Whither? Toward what new avatar?

This is what Strindberg told me: One day in the *crémérie* he met an American—a strange fellow—with a most portentous face, fat, snub, dew-lapped, thick-nosed bull of impudence and sensuality—a quack-face—German in type—who said he had just arrived in Paris to take up painting.

“I feared him,” Strindberg said, “and he pursued me—a strange and awful man!”

Then one night the man came to Strindberg’s poor room in the Rue d’Assas and asked for shelter. He was penniless; he had been driven out of his garret; the *crémérie* refused him further credit—he had tried to commit suicide, but the morphine had merely made him sick.

And so Strindberg—though he disliked and feared the man—harboured him, in his generous poverty, for two months. For the man was unhappy. He told Strindberg of his frightful career—driven from Germany for some folly and crime of youth—he had wandered through America for seven years—as waiter in cheap restaurants, as professional hypnotist, finally as *healer*.

“A dangerous man,” Strindberg whispered, “of shifty intelligence, a melancholy man, an unbridled sensualist—and what is most terrible is that he half believes in his own sorcery. He wanted to ‘heal’ me. He told me he had ‘healed’ five thousand people over in America—in 1895.”

Strindberg took from his pocket a page from the *Review of Reviews*

(the French edition) on which was a photograph of Schlatter.

“That is the man,” he said; “for two months I carried him on my shoulders—like an old man of the sea.”

“And then?” I asked.

“And then,” Strindberg said mysteriously, “he vanished. He was a terrible man. For days, even when I had food for him, he would pretend to fast. Perhaps he did. He said the only profit to be got out of life was in its contrasts. And then, having fasted, for days he would go to the Bal Bullier and drink and riot with the wild night-girls—and come back to my room and lie on the floor and weep and pray and curse for hours.”

And Strindberg added solemnly: “At last God has saved me from this demon—he has vanished.”

Was it Schlatter? I do not know. I say only what Strindberg said.

Was it Schlatter? Not long ago I was lecturing in Los Angeles.

It is a queer town, Los Angeles. Everything happens there.

I had just made some notes for my lecture, when a hairy little man left a newspaper at my door—a dreadful-looking sheet, the *Ram’s Horn*, and I read:

“His Majesty King Francis Schlatter and His Royal Highness Prince A. Schrader of Shiloh House and Pastors of the Baptist Church—Cancer cured by prayer—The Blessing of Handkerchiefs—King Francis Schlatter is performing the same miracles as he did before Queen Victoria in 1852, when she donated to him a big mansion!—Miracles Performed *Like* in the Days of Christ—Take Hollywood car to Fountain Avenue—I am Thy Lord that cures

you and *make* you whole—phone Holly 2664”—and all the rest of it!

Is this the same Schlatter who sponged on my poor friend, Strindberg, over in Paris? Is it the *old dog* in a new doublet? Or a new dog in the old spangled coat?

Anyway it is a queer thing to find him here—brawling about God in bad English and advertising miracles—(but anything can happen in Los Angeles, that sunlit city—)

But I was talking of Strindberg's *mad years*.

It was then he *made gold*—for among other things he was an alchemist.

Strindberg was not a scholar in the classical sense, though he was a good Latinist, but he was as widely educated as any man I ever met. Of all the sciences he knew more or less. He was biologist, mineralogist, botanist, chemist—a man insatiably curious. He had none of the autolatry of the professional man of letters—of the pale professional poet who fancies literature is an occupation infinitely superior to all others—that it confers a sacred character—No! He could conceive genius under many forms. And so he lived a multiple life. When I knew him he had been a gardener; he was to be a monk; and he was a chemist, a great chemist. Remember it was Strindberg who discovered the component parts of sulphur, proving it to be a ternary compound of carbon, oxygen and hydrogen. He did that!

His favourite walk was in the cemetery of Montparnasse. He noticed faint, awful exhalations rising from the graves—as though the badly buried dead were emerging from their tombs. So he went

hunting the ghosts of these dead men: Thierry, Orfila, Dumont d'Urville, Boulay—Napoleon's honest man.

He held an open phial filled with liquid acetate of lead over the grave; and having trapped his ghost he corked it up—like the genii in the bottle—and took it home. There under the microscope, he studied the precipitate—ghost-crystals of the dead. A strange man—

And he made gold! Poet, dreamer, visionary—he made gold. Always truth has been first seen in a vision—always it has come first to the dreamer! Alchemists and transmuters of metals—for a thousand years official science had called them charlatans! *Raymond Lutte* and Roger Bacon were charlatans; and *Basil Valentine*, who isolated and described radium eight centuries ago, was a charlatan. Then one day Madame Curée rediscovered radium; and one day Sir William Ramsay changed one metal into another—he transmuted copper into lithium—and those forgotten alchemists were justified of science. Dead beliefs—like dead men—never die!

Then came Strindberg—the mad poet, with his dream of energising copper into silver, silver into gold. In his garret in the Rue d'Assas he worked over his retorts—playing with fire until the skin fell in flakes from his poor hands. And failed.

Then there happened one of those mad things that were always happening in Strindberg's life. He had made two hundred experiments with no result—not a trace of gold on his test paper. He walked out one morning into the Ave. de l'Observatoire. Two little scraps of paper were blown to

him by the wind. He picked them up. On one were the figures 207: on the other—28. He took them home, and pondered. Now 207 is the atomic weight of lead and 28 that of silicium. That was all; but it was a glaze composed of lead and silicium that he transmuted for the first time into a mineralised gold of perfect beauty!

Dreamer, madman, poet, if you will—what was gold to him? In his own *Dream Play* he has given you the answer:

Dreaming child of man . . .  
When from thy winged flight above the  
earth  
At times thou sweetest *downward to the  
dust,*  
It is to touch it only—not to stay!

One day Strindberg did not come to the Café des Lilas; like the mystagogue Schlatter he had vanished; the next thing I heard was that he had entered a monastery in Belgium. (I was not surprised.)

Once he said to me in his emphatic French: "*Dieu m'a tourmenté toute ma vie*"—God has tormented me all my life long! Not even in the cloister was he to make peace with Him. In a little while he fled.

One other thing tormented him all his life—woman.

It appears by the history of Samson, which is recorded in a notable book, that woman is the enemy of strong men.

Now Strindberg was a strong man. And you can understand neither his plays nor his life if you do not know the fierce, deep and tragic influence women had on him. Strindberg's father was a shopkeeper, his mother a servant. In his youth he dreamed of fair ladies—châtelaines with white

hands and pale faces and soft eyes—and round him were the boisterous women of the tenement in which he lived. Then he met a Swedish countess—the dream-lady with white hands. She was married, but they broke that chain; and he swept her away into a new marriage of vehement adoration. And the pale lady trampled on his heart—rode him with spurs—poisoned his ideals. He woke from his dream of love, horrified—as one who has touched something cold and unclean.

In a book you know, *The Fool's Plea*, he pictured that woman—damned her forever in blasting and obliterating words. Ten years of married life; and the last words of the book are: "*Now the tale is told, my beloved. I am avenged. We are quits.*"

But it was not this woman alone upon whom he took vengeance—his anger fell upon all; and it was the anger, mark you, of a disappointed sentimentalist. In his plays and books he pours anathema upon women—and his savageness is that of a pathetic boy who has been disappointed in love.

His ideal of love was something incredibly high. The women he knew failed to come up to it—they were not white-handed heroines of romance, but food-hungry women with human tempers and habits—and he shrieked his disappointment and cursed his broken idols. And all his life long *women* tormented him—like God.

After the countess he married a vague, kindly Austrian woman; and he parted from her—at the Gare du Nord in Paris—parted forever "with ferocious joy!" and told it in a book.

*A third wife* I did not know. She was a Swedish actress; no one knows her—for Strindberg died before he had written a book about her! James Huneker told me about her. He had gone to Stockholm to see Strindberg; and the playwright sported his oak. But at the theatre Huneker met the gilded actress and she took him home with her after the play. Strindberg was sitting in his study—a silent, haggard man. The actress bubbled and made conversation; but Strindberg did not open his lips—and in his pale Northern eyes was the look of the man who has lost faith—even in actresses; and that is the great disillusion. Once only he spoke—a cryptic saying: Women are never unhappy unless they have reason to be unhappy—man, alone, is unhappy without cause.

And so Huneker went away.

There, in his later days, Strindberg found his God—a strange Swedenborgian god—possibly known here also in the United States, where there are (I have discovered) fifty-seven varieties of religion; all false. But he never regained his faith in woman.

You must remember that was the day when the *new* woman was abroad in Sweden—Ibsen had set her going and, in a little while, the flap of her loose shoe was heard half round the world. And her development in the narrow, Lutheran, provincial life of Sweden was singularly threatening to the astounded male of those parts.

*There* was fought again the eternal duel of sex. Strindberg's side was stated savagely enough in one of his plays—you may remember it—*Comrades*. Axel and Bertha are painters and the man is ruled, enslaved, de-

stroyed by the woman—even as in real life Strindberg was poisoned by his Swedish countess.

"In this war to the death between the two sexes," Axel says gloomily, "it would appear that woman, being the less honest and the more perverse, would come out conqueror—since man's chance of gaining the battle is very dubious. *He* is handicapped by an inbred respect for woman—without counting the advantage he gives her, in supporting her and leaving her time free to equip herself for the fight."

And so, in plays and books, again and again—with crude violence of language—with heart-broken vehemence—he curses women and knocks them about the ears. He could think of nothing else—of God and woman—and I am not sure there is anything else worth thinking about.

And so you get an impression of Strindberg as a great, blind, amorphous force, sprawling in the dark life of his day, like a helpless animal in a pool, a picture that is true enough.

And yet this man was the greatest dramatist of the age—the most important figure in the intellectual evolution of all Europe.

And now a word or two about his dramatic work.

In real life he was independent, disinterested, indomitable—he faced the most frightful misery, poverty, contempt rather than bend his neck to the hypocrisies of a provincial society. *A man's life is the best commentary on his works*. He was a rebel whose faculty of revolt was made terrible by a touch of genius.

Even so his works. His one duty



—he held—was to speak the truth, no matter how shameful it was, no matter how bitter. He had learned truth-speaking in a pitiless struggle, he had fought for bread as an usher in a school, as “super” in a theatre, as an apothecary’s drudge.

And yet—bear this in mind—in spite of the savage way he stripped modern life of its pretences—he began his literary career as a romanticist and sentimentalist and ended it as a writer of fairy-tales.

Of course you know him best by such plays as *The Father*, *Miss Julia*, *Pariah*, *Comrades*, *The Dance of Death*. They belong to his middle period. *The Father* was first produced in 1887—an epoch-making play. Here was all the strength—the bitter strength—of the new drama—beside which the ferocious trivialities of Ibsen were as water unto wine.

Remorselessly he flayed the human beast—if his hand trembled it was with excitement—it never flinched. He wrote with a dissecting-knife. And he laid bare all the brutality, egotism and irresponsibility of modern life. His hatred for evil and for cruelty was brutal and venomous as that of Swift. A play without laughter—like all his plays.

“They call *The Father* a sad play,” he said; “did they expect a tragedy to be jolly! People talk of the *Joy of Life* as though it consisted in dancing and farcical idiocy—for me the Joy of Life consists in the mighty and terrible struggles of life—in the capability of experiencing something—of learning something.”

So his plays are mighty struggles, terrible and dark—man’s tragic struggle with fate! Note, too, that

in all these plays of the middle period fate comes in the guise of a woman. (That was the dark lesson he learned from his Swedish countess.)

There must always be a victim—and almost always it is the man who succumbs. Why, in this eternal war of the sexes, are the men always conquered? It is because they have *distractions*. They wanton by the way. They forget the battle. They interest themselves in life, art, nature, friendship. They have neither the patience, nor the tenacity, nor the bitterness of woman. Now and then man lays down his arms. Thus in *The Father* the captain pursues his scientific studies—he is on the point of making a great discovery—and Laura, his wife, takes him unaware—when he has laid his sword aside.

Thus in *Creditors* Adolphe, the artist, is absorbed in his art—when the woman strikes him. The battle is unfair. It is waged between man, the dreamer, and woman, who has all the serene insensibility of Nature herself—Nature’s implacable and victorious cruelty. And the poets and savants and dreamers are those whom Nature—through her instrument woman—punishes most implacably.

Now this is the thesis of all those plays of the eighties and nineties, and they tell the story of Strindberg’s sufferings at the hands of his Swedish countess and the little, pinky, Austrian wife; and they tell nothing else. Amazing plays—in their sincerity and savage realism—remember that from them sprang the drama of modern realism that swept over Europe for a quarter of a century. They begot *Tristan Bernard* and many another; indeed they begot

George Bernard Shaw—which should be accounted to them for a certain sort of righteousness, I suppose—Heaven knows why!

But this is the point. If you are to understand Strindberg, the greatest figure in Scandinavian literature, you must see that his plays represent only a part of his life—and work. Strindberg was always a rebel—always, as he said, “*Je sonne la révolte et je brandis l'idée.*” (I sound the revolt and I brand the idea.) But he did not spend his whole life rebelling against his wife, which (at its best) is misdirected genius! His first plays were historical dramas—great national dramas of patriotism.

Once he said to me: “The only work one can go on taking a daily interest in is work done for the glory of the dead—or the good of those who are not yet born.” *Olaf the Reformer* is such a play—it enshrines the old glory of Sweden and proclaims new hope for a better future. Have you read *Peter in Search of His Fortune?*—this sort of *Faust* in miniature? Then you know why Strindberg is the great national poet of Sweden.

Forget what you have heard of his bitter and ferocious attack on women. Turn to the great dramas of his youth and his later days—*Gustav Wasa*, *Christine*, *Erich XIV*, *Olaf*—and you will understand why a nation followed him to his grave a few years ago. Read *Swan White* and *The Dream Play*—and you will understand why the children covered his coffin with wild flowers as he was borne—the great dead man—through the streets of his city.

In him, as in all of us, there were many men. God tormented him and

—all his life—the women tormented him. And a score of his plays—a half score of his books—are merely his cries of agony and revolt.

One of the men in him was this tortured rebel. Another was the reformer—heroic as his own Olaf—who fought the evils of a bad civilisation—the wrongs of government—the hypocrisies of religion—the shame of poverty. That is the Strindberg I love best. Those were his high moments, when life became a splendid adventure in heroism and sacrifice—and life, you know, should be either a tremendous adventure or nothing. That was the Strindberg who stood on a mountain peak.

There was another man in him—and this Strindberg, I think, the world will love best as the years go by and the noise of the battle he waged dies away. It was he who wrote the *Children's Saga*—and told of the Silver Moor and sang the fairy tales and told the little modern fables that sing themselves.

He was many men, but the greatest and truest of them was the dreamer.

Do you remember when Indra's daughter came down to him in the play? She drew her hand across her eyes and said: “All this time I have been dreaming.”

“It was not a dream,” he answered, “it was one of my poems.”

And Indra's daughter asked him: “Do you know what poetry is, then?”

And he said softly: “I know what *dreaming* is.”

And that was Strindberg's life—dreams of high and beautiful adventures—nightmares of shattered love—and dreams through which the fairies whispered mysterious sagas of the white north.



And then having dreamed for sixty years he died. But long before death took him he had learned the Great Lesson: The perfection of culture is not rebellion, but peace—not the battle hymn of Olaf, but a saga sung to children in the twilight.

## SUMMER, 1918

BY GLENN WARD DRESBACH

SLOWLY the summer comes and slowly goes—  
And eyes that but a summer past had seen  
New wonders, now strain out beyond the green  
Of fields and hills, as if to look on those  
Dear faces that are absent. No repose  
Is left to summer, for in every mien  
There is the mark of waiting, tense, between  
The stern days claimed by bravery and woes.

O eyes that watch, those faces bear the light  
Of spirits fired with the brands of truth . . .  
They face each firing line, with eyes that gleam  
From souls awakened for the needs of Right,  
To save with all brave love and strength of youth  
Our Nation's glory and our Nation's Dream!