

THE NEWLY-MARRIED COUPLE

Bjornstjerne M. Bjornson

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Produced by Nicole Apostola

INTRODUCTION

BJORNSTJERNE BJORNSON—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 Osterdal district, some sixty miles south of Trondhjem; a lonely spot, whose atmosphere and surroundings Bjornson 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 Osterdal 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 Bjornson came to it.

It was in surroundings such as this, and with scarcely any playfellows, that Bjornstjerne Bjornson 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 Bjornson 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 Synnove 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 Bjornson. 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 Bjornson, 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 Bjornson’s taking offence at a supposed attack on him in Ibsen’s early play *The League of Youth*, Bjornson 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*, Bjornson came into the field of controversy with a vigorous and generous championing of his rival.

Bjornson’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-Marrried Couple*), the first of the three plays in the present

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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 Bjornson'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," Bjornson 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 Bjornson'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"). Bjornson 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 Bjornson, 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!" Bjornson, 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. Bjornson's first successes in that field, which made him at once a popular dramatist, were *Redaktoren* (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, Bjornson 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, Bjornson 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.

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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. Bjornson, 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 Bjornson'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 “*deus 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 Bjornson'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 Bjornson), 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 Bjornson's work; and the controversial theme, that of religious tolerance, with a sane restraint. It cannot be denied, however, that Bjornson'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 Bjornson's and Ibsen's treatment of problems in their dramas. Ibsen contented himself with diagnosing social maladies; Bjornson's more genial nature hints also at the remedy, or at least at a palliative. Ibsen is a stern judge; Bjornson is, beyond that, a prophet of better things. Whereas Ibsen is first and foremost a dramatist, Bjornson 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 Bjornson the love of humankind.” Bjornson, 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 Bjornson's pen aroused such active controversy that he

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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. Bjornson 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.

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The FATHER. The MOTHER. LAURA, their daughter. AXEL, her husband. MATHILDE, her friend.

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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.

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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.)

Father (still reading). Perhaps it will be better for me to write. (AXEL stops.)

Mother. Yes, you will do it best.

[MATHILDE comes in, followed by a Servant, who throws the doors open.]

Mathilde. Breakfast is ready.

Father (taking his wife's arm). Keep your shawl on, my dear; it is cold in the hall. (They go out.)

Axel (as he offers LAURA his arm and leads her towards the door). Let me have a word with you, before we follow them!

Laura. But it is breakfast time.

Axel (to MATHILDE, who is standing behind them waiting). Do you mind going on? (MATHILDE goes out, followed by the Servant. AXEL turns to LAURA.) Will nothing move you? Go with me to this dance!

Laura. I thought that was what you were going to say.

Axel. For *my* sake!

Laura. But you saw for yourself that mother and father do not wish it?

Axel. *I* wish it.

Laura. When mother and father do not?

Axel. Then I suppose you are their daughter in the first place, and my wife only in the second?

Laura (with a laugh). Well, that is only natural.

Axel. No, it is not natural; because two days ago you promised to forsake your father and your mother and follow me.

Laura (laughing). To the ball? I certainly never promised that.

Axel. Wherever I wish.

Laura. But you mustn't wish that, Axel darling—because it is quite impossible.

Axel. It is quite possible, if you like to do it.

Laura. Yes, but I don't like.

Axel. That same day you also heard that a man is his wife's lord and master. You must be willing to leave them, if I wish it; it was on those terms that you gave me your hand, you obstinate little woman.

Laura. It was just so as to be able to be always with father and mother, that I did it.

Axel. So that was it. Then you have no wish to be always with me?

Laura. Yes—but not to forsake them.

Axel. Never?

Laura. Never? (Softly.) Yes, some day—when I must.

Axel. When must you?

Laura. When? When mother and father—are gone. But why think about such things?

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Axel. Don't cry, darling! Listen to me. Would you never be willing to follow me—until they have left us?

Laura. No!—how can you think so?

Axel. Ah, Laura, you don't love me.

Laura. Why do you say such a thing? You only want to make me unhappy.

Axel. You don't even know what love is.

Laura. I don't?—That is not kind of you.

Axel. Tell me what it is then, sweetheart!

Laura (kissing him). Now you mustn't talk about it any more; because you know, if you do, I shall have red eyes, and then father and mother will want to know why they are red, and I shall not be able to tell them, and it will be very embarrassing.

Axel. Better a few tears now than many later on.

Laura. But what have I done to cry about?

Axel. You have given your hand without giving your heart with it; your tongue said “yes,” but not your will; you have given yourself without realising what it means. And so, what ought to be the greatest and purest happiness in my life begins to turn to sorrow, and the future looks dark.

Laura. Oh, dear!—and is all this my fault?

Axel. No, it is my own fault. I have been deluding myself with flattering hopes. I thought it would be so easy a matter for my love to awaken yours; but I cannot make you understand me. Every way I have tried has failed. So I must call up my courage, and try the last chance.

Laura. The last chance? What do you mean?

Axel. Laura, I can't tell you how dearly I love you!

Laura. If you did, you wouldn't hurt me. I never hurt you.

Axel. Well, give in to me in just this one thing, and I shall believe it is the promise of more. Go with me to the ball!

Laura. You know I cannot do that!

Axel. Ah! then I dare not delay any longer!

Laura. You frighten me! You look so angry.

Axel. No, no. But things cannot go on like this any longer. I can't stand it!

Laura. Am I so bad, then? No one ever told me so before.

Axel. Don't cry, my dainty little fairy. You have nothing to blame yourself for—except for being so bewitchingly sweet whether you are laughing or crying. You exhale sweetness like a flower. I want your influence to pervade every place where I am, to distract me when I am moody and laugh away my longings. Hush, hush—no red eyes. Let no one see that. Here is your mother coming—no, it is Mathilde.

[Enter MATHILDE.]

Mathilde. Your coffee is getting cold.

Axel. We are just coming. At least, Laura is. I want to speak to you for a moment, if I may.

Mathilde. To me?

Axel. If you will allow me.

Mathilde. By all means.

Laura. But you are coming in to breakfast?

Axel. In a moment, darling.

Laura. And you are not angry with me any longer?

Axel (following her). I never was that. I never could be!

Laura. I am so glad! (Runs out.)

Mathilde. What is it you want?

Axel. Can you keep a secret?

Mathilde. No.

Axel. You won't?

Mathilde. No.

Axel. You won't share any more confidences with me? (Takes her hand.) You used to—

Mathilde (drawing back her hand and moving away from him). Yes, I used to.

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Axel. Why won't you any longer? (Goes up to her.) What is changed?

Mathilde. You. You are married now.

Axel. No, that is just what I am not.

Mathilde. Indeed.

Axel. You have sharp eyes. You must have seen that.

Mathilde. I thought it was all just as you wished.

Axel. You are giving me very abrupt answers. Have I offended you?

Mathilde. What makes you ask that?

Axel. Because lately you have avoided me. Remember how kind you were to me once—indeed, that I owe you everything. It was through you, you know, that I got at her. I had to make assignations with you, in order to meet her. I had to offer you my arm so as to be able to give her the other, and to talk to you so that she might hear my voice. The little darling thought she was doing you a service—

Mathilde. When as a matter of fact it was I that was doing her one—

Axel. Yes, and without suspecting it! That was the amusing part of it.

Mathilde. Yes, that was the amusing part of it.

Axel. But soon people began to say that you and I were secretly engaged, and that we were making a stalking-horse of Laura; so for her sake I had to bring matters to a head rather quickly.

Mathilde. Yes, you took a good many people by surprise.

Axel. Including even yourself, I believe—not to mention the old folk and Laura. But the worst of it is that I took my own happiness by surprise, too.

Mathilde. What do you mean?

Axel. Of course I knew Laura was only a child; but I thought she would grow up when she felt the approach of love. But she has never felt its approach; she is like a bud that will not open, and I cannot warm the atmosphere. But you could do that—you, in whom she has confided all her first longings—you, whose kind heart knows so well how to sacrifice its happiness for others. You know you are to some extent responsible, too, for the fact that the most important event in her life came upon her a little unpreparedly; so you ought to take her by the hand and guide her first steps away from her parents and towards me—direct her affections towards me—

Mathilde. I? (A pause.)

Axel. Won't you?

Mathilde. No—

Axel. But why not? You love her, don't you?

Mathilde. I do; but this is a thing—

Axel. —that you can do quite well! For you are better off than the rest of us—you have many more ways of reaching a person's soul than we have. Sometimes when we have been discussing something, and then you have given your opinion, it has reminded me of the refrains to the old ballads, which sum up the essence of the whole poem in two lines.

Mathilde. Yes, I have heard you flatter before.

Axel. I flatter? Why, what I have just asked you to do is a clearer proof than anything else how great my—

Mathilde. Stop, stop! I won't do it!

Axel. Why not? At least be frank with me!

Mathilde. Because—oh, because— (Turns away.)

Axel. But what has made you so unkind? (MATHILDE stops for a moment, as though she were going to answer; then goes hurriedly out.) What on earth is the matter with her? Has anything gone wrong between her and Laura? Or is it something about the house that is worrying her? She is too level-headed to be disturbed by trifles.—Well, whatever it is, it must look after itself; I have something else to think about. If the one of them *can't* understand me, and the other *won't*, and the old couple neither can nor will, I must act on my own account—and the sooner the better! Later on, it would look to other people like a rupture. It must be done now, before we settle down to this state of things; for if we were to do that, it would be all up with us. To acquiesce in such an unnatural state of affairs would be like crippling one's self on purpose. I am entangled hand and foot here in the meshes of a net of circumspection. I shall have to sail along at "dead slow" all my life—creep about among their furniture and their flowers as warily as among their habits. You might just as well try to stand the house on

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its head as to alter the slightest thing in it. I daren't move!—and it is becoming unbearable. Would it be a breach of a law of nature to move this couch a little closer to the wall, or this chair further away from it? And has it been ordained from all eternity that this table must stand just where it does? *Can* it be shifted? (Moves it.) It actually can! And the couch, too. Why does it stand so far forward? (Pushes it back.) And why are these chairs everlastingly in the way? This one shall stand there—and this one there. (Moves them.) I will have room for my legs; I positively believe I have forgotten how to walk. For a whole year I have hardly heard the sound of my own footstep—or of my own voice; they do nothing but whisper and cough here. I wonder if I have any voice left? (Sings.) “Bursting every bar and band, My fetters will I shatter; Striding out, with sword in hand, Where the fight”— (He stops abruptly, at the entrance of the FATHER, the MOTHER, LAURA and MATHILDE, who have come hurriedly from the breakfast table. A long pause.)

Laura. Axel, dear!

Mathilde. What, all by himself?

Mother. Do you think you are at a ball?

Father. And playing the part of musician as well as dancer?

Axel. I am amusing myself.

Father. With our furniture?

Axel. I only wanted to see if it was possible to move it.

Mother. If it was possible to move it?

Laura. But what were you shouting about?

Axel. I only wanted to try if I had any voice left.

Laura. If you had any voice left?

Mother. There is a big wood near the house, where you can practise that.

Father. And a waterfall—if you are anxious to emulate Demosthenes.

Laura. Axel, dear—are you out of your mind?

Axel. No, but I think I soon shall be.

Mother. Is there anything wrong?

Axel. Yes, a great deal.

Mother. What is it? Some unpleasant news by post?

Axel. No, not that—but I am unhappy.

Mother. Two days after your wedding?

Father. You have a very odd way of showing it.

Axel. I am taken like that sometimes.

Mother. But what is it? Evidently you are not as happy as we hoped you would be. Confide in us, Axel; we are your parents now, you know.

Axel. It is something I have been thinking about for a long time, but have not had the courage to mention.

Mother. Why? Aren't we good to you?

Axel. You are much too good to me.

Father. What do you mean by that?

Axel. That everything is made far too smooth for me here; my faculties get no exercise; I cannot satisfy my longing for activity and conflict—nor my ambition.

Father. Dear me! What do you want, if you please?

Axel. I want to work for myself, to owe my position in life to my own efforts—to become something.

Father. Really.—What a foolish idea! (Moves towards the door.)

Mother. But an idea we must take an interest in. He is our child's husband now, remember. What do you want to be, my boy? Member of Parliament?

Axel. No; but my uncle, who has about the largest legal practice in these parts, offered long ago to hand it over to me.

Mother. But you wouldn't be able to look after it from here, would you, Axel?

Father (at the door). A ridiculous idea!—Come back to breakfast. (Turns to go.)

Mother. That is true, isn't it? You couldn't look after it from here?

Axel. No; but I can move into town.

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All. Move into town? (A pause. The FATHER turns back from the door.)

Father. That is still more impossible, of course.

Mother. There must be something at the bottom of this. Is anything worrying you? (Lowering her voice.) Are you in debt?

Axel. No, thanks to the kindness of you two. You have freed me from that.

Mother. Then what is it, Axel? You have been so, strange lately— what is it, my dear boy?

Father. Nonsensical ideas—probably his stomach is disordered. Remember the last time I ate lobster!—Come along in and have a glass of sherry, and you will forget all about it.

Axel. No, it isn't a thing one can forget. It is always in my thoughts—more and more insistently. I must have work for my mind—some outlet for my ambition. I am bored here.

Mother. Two days after your wedding!

Father. Set to work then, for heaven's sake! What is there to hinder you? Would you like to take charge of one of my farms? Or to start some improvements on the estate?—or anything you please! I have no doubt you have ideas, and I will provide the money—only do not let us have any of this fuss!

Axel. But then I shall be indebted to you for everything, and shall feel dependent.

Father. So you would rather feel indebted to your uncle?

Axel. He will give me nothing. I must buy it from him.

Father. Really!—How?

Axel. With my work and my—. Oh well, I suppose you would lend me a little capital?

Father. Not a penny.

Axel. But why?

Father. I will tell you why. Because my son in law must be my son-in-law, and not a speculating lawyer who sits with his door open and a sign hung out to beg for custom.

Axel. Is a lawyer's profession a dishonourable one, then?

Father. No, it is not. But you have been received into one of the oldest and richest families in the country, and you owe some respect to its traditions. Generation after generation, from time immemorial, the heads of our family have been lords of the manor—not office seekers or fortune hunters. The honourable offices I have held have all been offered to me and not sought by me; and I am not going to have you chattering about your university degree or your talents. You shall stay quietly here, and you will be offered more than you want.

Mother. Come, come, my dear, don't get heated over it; that always makes you so unwell. Let us arrive at some arrangement without wrangling. Axel, you must be reasonable; you know he cannot stand any over-exertion. Laura, get your father a glass of water. Come, my dear, let us go back to the dining-room.

Father. Thanks, I have no appetite left now.

Mother. There, you see!—Axel, Axel!

Laura. For shame, Axel!

Mother. Sit down, dear, sit down! My goodness, how hot you are!

Father. It is so warm in here.

Mother. That is the stove. Shut it down, Mathilde!

Laura (to AXEL). You are a nice one, I must say!

Father. The chairs—put them straight! (They do so.) And the table! (They do so.) That is better.

Mother. That is the worst of a stranger in the house—something of this sort may so easily happen.

Father. But a thing like this!—I have never in my life been contradicted before.

Mother. It is for the first and last time! He will soon learn who you are and what is due to you.

Father. And to think that, the first time, it should be my son-in-law that—

Mother. He will regret it for the rest of your life, you may be sure, and when you are gone he will have no peace of mind. We can only hope that the atmosphere of affection in this house will improve him. Really, lately, Axel has behaved as if he were bewitched.

Laura. Yes, hasn't he?

Mother. Good gracious, Laura, do you mean that you—

Laura. No, I didn't mean anything.

Mother. Laura, are you trying to conceal something?

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Father. And from us? (Gets up.) Are things as bad as that?

Laura. I assure you, dear people, it is nothing; it is only—

Father and Mother (together). Only—?

Laura. No, no, it is nothing—only you frighten me so.

Father and Mother (together). She is crying!

Mathilde. She is crying!

Father. Now, sir—why is she crying?

Laura. But, father, father—look, I am not crying the least bit.

Mother and Mathilde. Yes, she is crying!

Axel. Yes—and will cry every day until we make a change here! (A pause, while they all look at him.) Well, as so much has been said, it may as well all come out. Our marriage is not a happy one, because it lacks the most essential thing of all.

Mother. Merciful heavens, what are you saying!

Father. Compose yourself; let me talk to him. What do you mean, sir?

Axel. Laura does not love me—

Laura. Yes, that is what he says!

Axel. She hasn't the least idea what love means, and will never learn as long as she is in her father's house.

Mother and Father. Why?

Axel. Because she lives only for her parents; me, she looks upon merely as an elder brother who is to assist her in loving them.

Mother. Is that so distasteful to you, then?

Axel. No, no. I am devoted to you and grateful to you, and I am proud of being your son; but it is only through her that I am that—and she has never yet really taken me to her heart. I am quite at liberty to go away or to stay, as I please; *she* is a fixture here. There is never one of her requests to me, scarcely a single wish she expresses—indeed, scarcely a sign of endearment she shows me, that she has not first of all divided up into three portions; and I get my one-third of it, and get it last or not at all.

Mother. He is jealous—and of us!

Father. Jealous of us!

Laura. Yes, indeed he is, mother.

Father. This is mere fancy, Axel—a ridiculous idea. Do not let any one else hear you saying that.

Axel. No, it is neither mere fancy nor is it ridiculous. It colours the whole of our relations to one another; it gnaws at my feelings, and then I torment her, make you angry, and lead an idle, empty, ill-tempered existence—

Father. You are ill, there is no doubt about it.

Axel. I am, and you have made me ill.

Father and Mother (together). We have?

Father. Please be a little—

Axel. You allow her to treat me simply as the largest sized of all the dolls you have given her to play with. You cannot bear to see her give away any more of her affection than she might give to one of her dolls.

Father. Please talk in a more seemly manner! Please show us a proper respect—

Axel. Forgive me, my dear parents, if I don't. What I mean is that a child cannot be a wife, and as long as she remains with you she will always be a child.

Mother. But, Axel, did we not tell you she was only a child—

Father. We warned you, we asked you to wait a year or two—

Mother. Because we could not see that she loved you sufficiently.

Father. But your answer was that it was just the child in her that you loved.

Mother. Just the child's innocence and simplicity. You said you felt purer in her presence; indeed, that she sometimes made you feel as if you were in church. And we, her father and mother, understood that, for we had felt it ourselves.

Father. We felt that just as much as you, my son.

Mother. Do you remember one morning, when she was asleep, that you said her life was a dream which it would be a sin to disturb?

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Father. And said that the mere thought of her made you tread more softly for fear of waking her.

Axel. That is quite true. Her childlike nature shed happiness upon me, her gentle innocence stilled me. It is quite true that I felt her influence upon my senses like that of a beautiful morning.

Father. And now you are impatient with her for being a child!

Axel. Exactly! At the time when I was longing to lead her to the altar, I daresay I only thought of her as an inspiration to my better self and my best impulses. She was to me what the Madonna is to a good Catholic; but now she has become something more than that. The distance between us no longer exists; I cannot be satisfied with mere adoration, I must love; I cannot be satisfied with kneeling to her, I need my arms around her. Her glance has the same delicacy it always had, the same innocence; but I can no longer sit and gaze at her by the hour. Her glance must lose itself in mine in complete surrender. Her hand, her arm, her mouth are the same as they were; but I need to feel her hand stroking my hair, her arm round my neck, her mouth on mine; her thoughts must embrace mine and be like sunshine in my heart. She was a symbol to me, but the symbol has become flesh and blood. When first she came into my thoughts it was as a child; but I have watched her day by day grow into a woman, whose shyness and ignorance make her turn away from me, but whom I must possess. (LAURA moves quickly towards him.)

Mother. He loves our child!

Father. He loves her! (Embraces his wife.) What more is there to say, then? Everything is as it should be. Come along and have a glass of sherry!

Axel. No, everything is not as it should be. I can get her gratitude sometimes in a lucky moment, but not her heart. If I am fond of a certain thing, she is not. If I wish a thing, she wishes the opposite—for instance, if it's only a question of going to a ball, she won't take any pleasure in it unless her mother can go too.

Mother. Good heavens, is it nothing but that!

Laura. No, mother, it is nothing else; it is this ball.

Father. Then for any sake go to the ball! You are a couple of noodles. Come along, now.

Axel. The ball? It is not the ball. I don't care a bit about the ball.

Laura. No, that is just it, mother. When he gets what he wants, it turns out that it wasn't what he wanted at all, but something quite different. I don't understand what it is.

Axel. No, because it is not a question of any one thing, but of our whole relations to one another. Love is what I miss; she does not know what it means, and never will know—as long as she remains at home here. (A pause.)

Mother (slowly). As long as she remains at home?

Father (coming nearer to him, and trembling slightly). What do you mean by that?

Axel. It will be only when Laura finds she can no longer lean upon her parents, that she may possibly come to lean upon me.

Mother. What does he mean?

Father. I don't understand—

Axel. If she is to be something more than a good daughter—if she is to be a good wife—Laura must go away from here.

Mother. Laura go away?

Father. Our child?

Laura (to her MOTHER). Mother!

Axel. It would be wronging her whom I love so deeply, it would be wronging myself, and wronging you who mean so well, if now, when the power is in my hands, I had not the spirit to make use of it. Here, Laura lives only for you; when you die, life will be over for her. But that is not what marriage means, that is not what she promised at the altar, and that is what I cannot submit to. To go on like this will only make us all unhappy; and that is why Laura must go with me! (The MOTHER starts forward; LAURA goes to MATHILDE.)

Father. You cannot mean what you say.

Axel. I am in deadly earnest, and no one can shake my resolution.

Mother. Then Heaven have mercy on us! (A pause.)

Father. You know, Axel, that God gave us five children; and you know, too, that He took four away from us again. Laura is now our only child, our only joy.

Mother. We can't bear to lose her, Axel! She has never been away from us a single day since she was born.

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She is the spoilt child of our sorrow; if death itself claimed her, we should have to hold fast on to her.

Father. Axel, you are not a wicked man; you have not come amongst us to make us all unhappy?

Axel. If I were to give in now, this state of things would occur again every week or so, and none of us could stand that. For that reason, my dear parents, prove yourselves capable of a sacrifice. Let us put an end to it once for all—and let Laura move into town with me next week.

Father. Good heavens—it is impossible!

Mother. You won't have the heart to do that. Look at her, and then say that again! (AXEL turns away.) No, I knew you could not. (To the FATHER.) You talk to him! Tell him the truth, set him right, since he has broken in upon a good and loving family only to bring misfortune to it.

Father. In this house, as far back as I can remember, no hard words have ever been used. It seems to me like some evil dream, that I am struggling to wake out of and cannot! (A pause.) Mr. Hargaut, when we gave our daughter to you, we made no conditions. We admitted you into a happy family, to a position of wealth, to a promising future; and we expected, in return, some little affection, some little appreciation—at least some little respect. But you behave like—like a stranger, who is admitted to one's intimacy and good offices, and then one morning goes off with the most valuable possessions in the house—like an ungrateful, cruel—! We have confided our child, the dearest, sweetest child, our only child, to—a man without a heart! We were two happy parents, rich in her love—parents whom every one envied and we now are two poor bereaved wretches, who must creep away together into a corner in their unhappy disillusionment. (Sits down.)

Mother. And this is the way you can treat the man who has given you everything! What answer have you to give him?

Axel. It makes my heart bleed. If I had thought it would be as hard as this, indeed I would never have begun it; but if we leave the matter unsettled, now that it has been broached, we shall never be on proper terms with one another again. Of that I am certain. If it is a matter that pains us all, for that very reason let us go through with it and get it settled.

Father. Poor confiding fools that we have been!

Mother. Can't you give us some respite, so that we may think things over quietly? This is simply tearing us apart.

Axel. It would only prolong your pain, and it would end in your hating me. No, it must be done now—at once; otherwise it will never be done.

Mother. Oh dear, oh dear! (Sits down.)

Father. Axel! Listen to us for a moment! It is quite possible you may be in the right; but for that very reason I beg you—I, who have never yet begged anything of any one—I beg you, be merciful! I am an old man, and cannot stand it—and she (looking at his wife) still less.

Axel. Ah, I am not hard-hearted—but I must try to be resolute. If I lose now, I shall be losing her for life, I know. Therefore she *shall* go with me!

Mother (springing up). No, she shall not! If you loved her, as you say you do, you hypocrite, you would remain where she is—and here she shall stay!

Laura (who has been standing beside MATHILDE, goes to her MOTHER). Yes, to my dying day.

Father (getting up). No! We must not alter God's law. It is written: "A man shall forsake his father and his mother, and cleave only unto his wife"—and in the same way she must cleave only to him. Laura shall go when he wishes.

Laura. Father, can you—have you the heart to—?

Father. No, I haven't the heart to, my child. But I shall do it nevertheless, because it is right. Oh, Laura!—(Embraces her. The MOTHER joins her embrace to his.)

Mathilde (to AXEL). You Jesuit!—You have no consideration, no mercy; you trample upon hearts as you would upon the grass that grows in your path. But you shall not find this so easy as you think. It is true she is a child—but I shall go with her! I don't know you, and I don't trust you. (Clenches her fist.) But I shall watch over her!

[Curtain.]

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ACT II

(SCENE.—AXEL'S house, a year later. The room is arranged almost identically like that in the first act. Two large portraits of LAURA'S parents, very well executed, hang in full view. LAURA is sitting at the table, MATHILDE on the couch on the right.)

Mathilde (reading aloud from a book). “No,' was the decided answer. Originally it was he that was to blame, but now it is she. He tore her from her parents, her home and her familiar surroundings; but since then he has sought her forgiveness so perseveringly, and her love so humbly, that it would take all the obstinacy of a spoiled child to withstand him. Just as formerly he could think of nothing but his love, so now she will consider nothing except her self-love; but she is so much the more to blame than he, as her motives are less good than his. She is like a child that has woke up too early in the morning; it strikes and kicks at any one that comes to pet it.”

Laura. Mathilde—does it really say that?

Mathilde. Indeed it does.

Laura. Just as you read it?

Mathilde. Look for yourself.

Laura (takes the book and looks at it, then lays it down). It is almost our own story, word for word. I would give anything to know who has written it.

Mathilde. It is a mere coincidence—

Laura. No, some wicked wretch has seen something like this—some creature that is heartless enough to be able to mock at a parent's love; it must be some one who either is worthless himself or has had worthless parents!

Mathilde. Why, Laura, how seriously you take it!

Laura. Yes, it irritates me, this libelling of all fidelity. What is fidelity, if it does not mean that a child should be true to its parents?

Mathilde. But I was just reading to you about that. (Reads.) “The object of fidelity changes, as we ourselves change. The child's duty is to be true to its parents; the married, to one another; the aged, to their children—”

Laura. Don't read any more! I won't hear any more! Its whole train of thought offends me. (After a pause.) What a horrid book! (Indifferently.) What happens to them in the end?

Mathilde (in the same tone). To whom?

Laura. That couple—in the book.

Mathilde (still in an indifferent tone). It doesn't end happily. (A pause.)

Laura (looking up). Which of them suffers?

Mathilde. Which do you think?

Laura (beginning to sew again). She, I should think—because she is unhappy already.

Mathilde. You have guessed right. She falls in love.

Laura (astonished). Falls in love?

Mathilde. Yes. Sometime or other, love is awakened in the heart of every woman; and then, if she cannot love her husband, in the course of time she will love some one else.

Laura (dismayed). Some one else!

Mathilde. Yes. (A pause.)

Laura. That is horrible! (Begins to sew, then lays her hand down on the table, then begins to sew again.) And what happens to him?

Mathilde. He falls ill, very ill. And then some one finds him out and comforts him—a woman.

Laura (looking up). How does that happen?

Mathilde. His heart is like an empty house, in an atmosphere of sadness and longing. Little by little she—the woman who comforts him—creeps into it; and so in time there comes the day when he can say he is happy. (A pause.)

Laura (quietly). Who is she?

Mathilde. One of those poor-spirited creatures that can be content with the aftermath of love.

Laura (after a pause, during which she has been looking fixedly at MATHILDE). Could you be that?

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Mathilde. No!—I must be first or nothing!

Laura. But about her?

Mathilde. The wife?

Laura. Yes. What happens to her?

Mathilde. Directly she realises that love for another has taken possession of her husband, she turns towards him with all her heart; but it is too late then. (LAURA sits absorbed for a few moments; then gets up hurriedly and goes to a little work-table that is standing at the end of the couch on the left, opens it, looks for something in it, stops to think, then looks in it again.) What are you looking for?

Laura. A photograph.

Mathilde. Axel's?

Laura. No—but what has become of it?

Mathilde. Don't you remember that one day you took it up and said you would not have it? So I hid it.

Laura. You?

Mathilde. Yes—till you should ask about it. (Gets up, opens her work-table that stands by the right-hand couch.) Here it is. (Gives it to her.)

Laura. So you have got it! (Lays it in her table drawer without looking at it, shuts the drawer, goes a few paces away, then comes back, turns the key in the drawer and takes it out.) Has Axel read the new book?

Mathilde. I don't know. Shall I give it to him?

Laura. Just as you like. Perhaps you would like to read it aloud to him. (A Maid comes in with a letter; LAURA takes it, and the Maid goes out again.) From my parents! (Kisses the letter with emotion.) The only ones who love me! (Goes out hurriedly. At the same moment AXEL comes in from the outer door.)

Axel. She always goes when I come in!

Mathilde (getting up). This time it was an accident, though. (Looks at him.) How pale you are!

Axel (seriously). I am rather worried.—Have you read the new novel?

Mathilde (putting the book in her pocket). What novel?

Axel. “The Newly-Married Couple”—quite a small book.

Mathilde. Oh, that one—I have just been reading it.

Axel (eagerly). And Laura too? Has Laura read it?

Mathilde. She thinks it is a poor story.

Axel. It isn't that, but it is an extraordinary one. It quite startles me—it is like coming into one's own room and seeing one's self sitting there. It has caught hold of unformed thoughts that lie hidden deep in my soul.

Mathilde. Every good book does that.

Axel. Everything will happen to me just as it does in that book; the premises are all here, only I had not recognised them.

Mathilde. I have heard of very young doctors feeling the symptoms of all the diseases they read about.

Axel. Oh, but this is more than mere imagination. My temptations come bodily before me. My thoughts are the result of what happens, just as naturally as smoke is the result of fire—and these thoughts (lancing at MATHILDE) lead me far.

Mathilde. As far as I can see, the book only teaches consideration for a woman, especially if she is young.

Axel. That is true. But, look here—a young man, brought up among students, cannot possibly possess, ready-made, all this consideration that a woman's nature requires. He doesn't become a married man in one day, but by degrees. He cannot make a clean sweep of his habits and take up the silken bonds of duty, all in a moment. The inspiration of a first love gives him the capacity, but he has to learn how to use it. I never saw what I had neglected till I had frightened her away from me. But what is there that I have not done, since then, to win her? I have gone very gently to work and tried from every side to get at her—I have tempted her with gifts and with penitence—but you can see for yourself she shrinks from me more and more. My thoughts, wearied with longings and with the strain of inventing new devices, follow her, and my love for her only grows—but there are times when such thoughts are succeeded by a void so great that my whole life seems slipping away into it. It is then I need some one to cling to—. Oh, Mathilde, you have meant very much to me at times like that. (Goes up to her.)

Mathilde (getting up). Yes, all sorts of things happen in a year that one never thought of at the beginning of it.

Axel (sitting down). Good God, what a year! I haven't the courage to face another like it. This book has

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frightened me.

Mathilde (aside). That's a good thing, anyway.

Axel (getting up). Besides—the amount of work I have to do, to keep up everything here just as she was accustomed to have it, is getting to be too much for me, Mathilde. It won't answer in the long run. If only I had the reward of thanks that the humblest working-man gets—if it were only a smile; but when I have been travelling about for a week at a time, exposed to all sorts of weather in these open boats in winter, do I get any welcome on my home-coming? When I sit up late, night after night, does she ever realise whom I am doing it for? Has she as much as noticed that I have done so—or that I have, at great expense, furnished this house like her parents'? No, she takes everything as a matter of course; and if any one were to say to her, "He has done all this for your sake," she would merely answer, "He need not have done so, I had it all in my own home."

Mathilde. Yes, you have come to a turning-point now.

Axel. What do you mean?

Mathilde. Nothing particular—here she comes!

Axel. Has anything happened? She is in such a hurry!

[LAURA comes in with an open letter in her hand.]

Laura (in a low voice, to MATHILDE). Mother and father are so lonely at home that they are going abroad, to Italy; but they are coming here, Mathilde, before they leave the country.

Mathilde. Coming here? When?

Laura. Directly. I hadn't noticed—the letter is written from the nearest posting station; they want to take us by surprise—they will be here in a few minutes. Good heavens, what are we to do?

Mathilde (quickly). Tell Axel that!

Laura. I tell him?

Mathilde. Yes, you must.

Laura (in a frightened voice). I?

Mathilde (to AXEL). Laura has something she wants to tell you.

Laura. Mathilde!

Axel. This is something new.

Laura. Oh, do tell him, Mathilde. (MATHILDE says nothing, but goes to the back of the room.)

Axel (coming up to her). What is it?

Laura (timidly). My parents are coming.

Axel. Here?

Laura. Yes.

Axel. When? To-day?

Laura. Yes. Almost directly.

Axel. And no one has told me! (Takes up his hat to go.)

Laura (frightened). Axel!

Axel. It is certainly not for the pleasure of finding me here that they are coming.

Laura. But you mustn't go!

Mathilde. No, you mustn't do that.

Axel. Are they not going to put up here?

Laura. Yes, I thought—if you are willing—in your room.

Axel. So that is what it is to be—I am to go away and they are to take my place.

Mathilde. Take my room, and I will move into Laura's. I will easily arrange that. (Goes out.)

Axel. Why all this beating about the bush? It is quite natural that you should want to see them, and equally natural that I should remove myself when they come; only you should have broken it to me—a little more considerately. Because I suppose they are coming now to take you with them—and, even if it means nothing to you to put an end to everything like this, at all events you ought to know what it means to me!

Laura. I did not know till this moment that they were coming.

Axel. But it must be your letters that have brought them here— your complaints—

Laura. I have made no complaints.

Axel. You have only told them how matters stand here.

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Laura. Never. (A pause.)

Axel (in astonishment). What have you been writing to them all this year, then—a letter every day?

Laura. I have told them everything was going well here.

Axel. Is it possible? All this time? Laura! Dare I believe it? Such consideration— (Comes nearer to her.) Ah, at last, then—?

Laura (frightened). I did it out of consideration for them.

Axel (coldly). For them? Well, I am sorry for them, then. They will soon see how things stand between us.

Laura. They are only to be here a day or two. Then they go abroad.

Axel. Abroad? But I suppose some one is going with them?—you, perhaps?

Laura. You can't, can you?

Axel. No.—So you are going away from me, Laura!—I am to remain here with Mathilde—it is just like that book.

Laura. With Mathilde? Well—perhaps Mathilde could go with them?

Axel. You know we can't do without her here—as things are at present.

Laura. Perhaps you would rather I—?

Axel. There is no need for you to ask my leave. You go if you wish.

Laura. Yes, you can do without *me*.—All the same, I think I shall stay!

Axel. You will stay—with me?

Laura. Yes.

Axel (in a happier voice, coming up to her). *That* is not out of consideration for your parents?

Laura. No, that it isn't! (He draws back in astonishment. MATHILDE comes in.)

Mathilde. It is all arranged. (To AXEL.) You will stay, then?

Axel (looking at LAURA). I don't know.—If I go away for these few days, perhaps it will be better.

Mathilde (coming forward). Very well, then I shall go away too!

Laura. You?

Axel. You?

Mathilde. Yes, I don't want to have anything to do with what happens. (A pause.)

Axel. What do you think will happen?

Mathilde. That is best left unsaid—till anything does happen. (A pause.)

Axel. You are thinking too hardly of your friend now.

Laura (quietly). Mathilde is not my friend.

Axel. Mathilde not your—

Laura (as before). A person who is always deceiving one is no friend.

Axel. Has Mathilde deceived anybody? You are unjust.

Laura (as before). Am I? It is Mathilde's fault that I am unhappy now.

Axel. Laura!

Laura. My dear, you may defend her, if you choose; but you must allow me to tell you plainly that it is Mathilde's advice that has guided me from the days of my innocent childhood, and has led me into all the misery I am suffering now! If it were not for her I should not be married to-day and separated from my parents. She came here with me—not to help me, as she pretended—but to be able still to spy on me, quietly and secretly, in her usual way, and afterwards to make use of what she had discovered. But she devotes herself to you; because she—no, I won't say it! (With growing vehemence.) Well, just you conspire against me, you two—and see whether I am a child any longer! The tree that you have torn up by the roots and transplanted will yield you no fruit for the first year, however much you shake its branches! I don't care if things do happen as they do in that story she has taken such pleasure in reading to me; but I shall never live to see the day when I shall beg for any one's love! And now my parents are coming to see everything, everything—and that is just what I want them to do! Because I won't be led like a child, and I won't be deceived! I won't! (Stands quite still for a moment, then bursts into a violent fit of crying and runs out.)

Axel (after a pause). What is the meaning of that?

Mathilde. She hates me.

Axel (astonished). When did it come to that?

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Mathilde. Little by little. Is it the first time you have noticed it?

Axel (still more astonished). Have you no longer her confidence, then?

Mathilde. No more than you.

Axel. She, who once believed every one—!

Mathilde. Now she believes no one. (A pause.)

Axel. And what is still more amazing—only there is no mistaking it—is that she is jealous!

Mathilde. Yes.

Axel. And of you?—When there is not the slightest foundation—. (Stops involuntarily and looks at her; she crosses the room.)

Mathilde. You should only be glad that this has happened.

Axel. That she is jealous?—or what do you mean?

Mathilde. It has helped her. She is on the high road to loving you now.

Axel. Now?

Mathilde. Love often comes in that way—especially to the one who has been made uneasy.

Axel. And you are to be the scapegoat?

Mathilde. I am accustomed to that.

Axel (quickly, as he comes nearer to her). You must have known love yourself, Mathilde?

Mathilde (starts, then says). Yes, I have loved too.

Axel. Unhappily?

Mathilde. Not happily. But why do you ask?

Axel. Those who have been through such an experience are less selfish than the rest of us and are capable of more.

Mathilde. Yes. Love is always a consecration, but not always for the same kind of service.

Axel. Sometimes it only brings unhappiness.

Mathilde. Yes, when people have nothing in them, and no pride.

Axel. The more I get to know of you, the less I seem really to know you. What sort of a man can this fellow be, that you have loved without return?

Mathilde (in a subdued voice). A man to whom I am now very grateful; because marriage is not my vocation.

Axel. What is your vocation, then?

Mathilde. One that one is unwilling to speak about, until one knows that it has been successful.—And I don't believe I should have discovered it, but for him.

Axel. And is your mind quite at peace now? Have you no longings?

Mathilde (speaking here, and in what follows, with some vehemence). Yes, a longing to travel—a long, long way! To fill my soul with splendid pictures!—Oh, if you have any regard for me—

Axel. I have more than that, Mathilde—the warmest gratitude—and more than that, I—

Mathilde (interrupting him). Well, then, make it up with Laura! Then I shall be able to go abroad with her parents. Oh, if I don't get away—far away—there is something within me that will die!

Axel. Go away then, Mathilde—you say so, and therefore I believe you.

Mathilde. But I am not going till you two are reconciled! I don't want all three of us to be unhappy. No, I am not unhappy; but I shall be if you are—and if I don't get abroad now!

Axel. What can I do in the matter?

Mathilde (quickly). Stay here and give the old folk a welcome! Behave to Laura as if there were nothing the matter, and she will say nothing!

Axel. Why do you think she will say nothing?

Mathilde. Because of all I have done to make that likely!

Axel. You?

Mathilde. Yes—no—yes; at least, not as you wanted me to, but indirectly—

Axel. Even at the beginning of all this?

Mathilde. No, not then, it is true. But forget that, because now I have made it good! I did not know you then—and there were reasons—

Axel (going nearer to her). Mathilde, you have filled me with an extraordinary regard for you—as if

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everything that I have been denied in another quarter was to be found in you, and as if now for the first time I—

Mathilde. There is the carriage!

Axel. What shall I do?

Mathilde. Go down and welcome the old folk! Be quick! Look, Laura is down there already—oh, don't let her miss you just at this moment! There, that is right. (He goes.) Yes, that was right; this is my first real victory!

(Goes out. Voices are heard without, and soon afterwards the MOTHER comes in with LAURA, and after her the FATHER with AXEL and MATHILDE.)

Mother. So here I am in your home, my darling child! (Kisses her.) It is really worth being separated, for the pleasure of meeting again! (Kisses her.) And such nice letters from you, every single day—thank you, darling! (Kisses her again.) And you look just the same—just the same! Perhaps a trifle paler, but that is natural. (Kisses her.)

Axel (to the FATHER, who is taking off a coat and several comforters). May I?

Father (bowing). Thank you, I can manage quite well myself.

Axel. But let me hang them up for you?

Father. Much obliged—I will do it myself! (Takes them out into the hall.)

Mother (to LAURA, in a low voice). It was hard work to get your father to come, I can tell you. He still cannot forget—. But we had to see our little girl before we set off on our travels; and we had to travel, because it was getting so lonely at home.

Laura. Dear mother! (She and MATHILDE help her to take her things off.)

Axel (to the FATHER, who has come in again). I hope you had a pleasant journey, sir?

Father. Remarkably pleasant.

Axel. Caught no cold, I hope?

Father. Nothing to speak of—just a trifle—a slightly relaxed throat; out late—and heavy dews. You are well?

Axel. Very well, thank you.

Father. I am extremely pleased to hear it.

Mother (to the FATHER). But, do you see—?

Father. What, my love?

Mother. Do you mean to say you don't see?

Father. No, what is it?

Mother. We are at home again! This is our own room over again!

Father (in astonishment). Upon my word—!

Mother. The carpet, the curtains, the furniture, everything—even down to their arrangement in the room! (Goes across to AXEL and takes his hand.) A more touching proof of your love for her we could never have had! (To the FATHER.) Isn't that so?

Father (struggling with his astonishment). Yes, I must say—

Mother. And you never wrote us a single word about this, Laura?

Mathilde. It is not only this room, but the whole house is arranged like yours as far as possible.

Mother. The whole house! Is it possible!

Father. It is the most charming way of giving pleasure to a young wife that I ever heard of!

Mother. I am so astonished, Laura, at your never having mentioned a word of all this in your letters.

Father. Never a word of it!

Mother. Hadn't you noticed it?

Father. Ah, well—what one sees every day, one is apt to think every one knows all about—isn't that it, little girl? That is the explanation, isn't it?

Mother. And Axel has given you all this by his own exertions! Aren't you proud of that?

Father (clapping her on the back). Of course she is, but it was never Laura's way to say much about her feelings; although this is really something so—

Mother (laughing). Her letters lately have been nothing but dissertations upon love.

Laura. Mother!—

Mother. Oh, I am going to tell! But you have a good husband, Laura.

Laura. Mother!—

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Mother (in a lower voice). You have paid him some little attentions in return, of course?—given him something, or—

Father (pushing in between them). Worked something for him, eh?

(MATHILDE, in the meantime, has brought in wine and filled some glasses.)

Axel. Now, a glass of wine to welcome you—sherry, your favourite wine, sir.

Mother. He remembers that! (They each take a glass in their hands.)

Axel. Laura and I bid you heartily welcome here in our house! And we hope you will find everything here—(with emotion) just as you would wish it. I will do my best that you shall, and I am sure Laura will too.

Mother. Of course she will!—Drink his health! (AXEL touches her glass with his; her hand trembles, and she spills some wine.) You have filled the glasses too full, my dear! (They all clink glasses and drink.)

Father (when the glasses have been filled again). My wife and I— thank you very much for your welcome. We could not set out on our journey without first seeing our child—our two children. A good friend of ours (looking at MATHILDE) advised us to come unexpectedly. At first we did not want to but now we are glad we did; because now we can see for ourselves that Laura told the truth in her letters. You are happy—and therefore we old folk must be happy too, and bury all recollection of what—what evidently happened for the best. Hm, hm!—At one time we could not think it was so—and that was why we did not wish to be parted from our child; but now we can make our minds quite easy about it—because now we can trust you. I have complete trust in you, Axel, my dear son—God bless you! (They grasp hands, and drink to each other again.)

Mother. Do you know what I should like?

All. No!

Mother. I should like Axel to tell us how your reconciliation came about.

Laura. Mother!

Mother. Why should you be shy about it? Why have you never told us about it? Good gracious, didn't you think your parents would be only too glad to hear how lucky their little girl was?

Father. I think it is a very good idea of your mother's. Now let us sit down and hear all about it. (They sit down; LAURA turns away.) No, come and sit down beside your mother, Laura! We are going to have a good look at you while he tells us about it. (Pulls her to him.)

Mother. And don't forget anything, Axel! Tell us of the very first sign of love, the first little kindness, Laura showed you.

Axel. Yes, I will tell you how it came about.

Laura (getting up). But, Axel—!

Axel. I shall only be supplementing what you told in your letters, Laura.

Mother. It is all to your credit, my child! Now be quiet and listen to him, and correct him if he forgets anything. (Pulls her down to her seat again.)

Axel. Yes, my dear parents. You know, of course, that we did not begin very well—

Father. Quite so—but you can pass over that.

Axel. As soon as she was left to depend on herself alone, I realised the great wrong I had done to Laura. She used to tremble when I came near her, and before long she used to tremble just as much before any one. At first I felt the humility of a strong man who has triumphed; but after a time I became anxious, for I had acted too strongly. Then I dedicated my love to the task of winning back, in a Jacob's seven years of service, what I had lost in one moment. You see this house—I made everything smooth in it for her feet. You see what we have round us—I set that before her eyes. By means of nights of work, by exerting myself to the uttermost, I got it all together, bit by bit—in order that she should never feel anything strange or inhospitable in her home, but only what she was accustomed to and fond of. She understood; and soon the birds of spring began to flutter about our home. And, though she always ran away when I came, I was conscious of her presence in a hundred little loving touches in my room—at my desk—

Laura (ashamed). Oh, it isn't true!

Axel. Don't believe her! Laura is so kind-hearted—her fear of me made her shy, but she could not withstand her own kind impulses and my humble faithfulness. When I was sitting late in my room, working for her, she was sitting up in hers—at any rate I often thought I heard her footstep; and when I came home late after a wearisome journey, if she did not run to welcome me, it was not because she was wanting in wifely gratitude—Laura has no

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lack of that—but because she did not wish to betray her happiness till the great day of our reconciliation should come. (LAURA gets up.)

Father. Then you were not reconciled immediately?

Axel. Not immediately.

Mother (anxiously, in a subdued voice). My goodness, Laura did not say a word about that!

Axel. Because she loved you, and did not want to distress you unnecessarily. But does not her very silence about it show that she was waiting for me? That was her love's first gift to me. (LAURA sits down again.) After a while she gave me others. She saw that I was not angry; on the contrary, she saw that where I had erred, I had erred through my love for her; and she is so loving herself, that little by little she schooled herself to meet me in gentle silence—she longed to be a good wife. And then, one lovely morning—just like to-day—we both had been reading a book which was like a voice from afar, threatening our happiness, and we were driven together by fear. Then, all at once, all the doors and windows flew wide open! It was your letter! The room seemed to glow with warmth—just as it does now with you sitting there; summer went singing through the house— and then I saw in her eyes that all the blossoms were going to unfold their petals! Then I knelt down before her, as I do now, and said: For your parents' sake, that they may be happy about us—for my sake, that I may not be punished any longer—for your own sake, that you may be able again to live as the fulness of your kind heart prompts—let us find one another now! And then Laura answered— (LAURA throws herself into his arms, in a burst of tears. All get up.)

Mother. That was beautiful, children!

Father. As beautiful as if we were young again ourselves, and had found one another!—How well he told it, too!

Mother. Yes, it was just as if it was all happening before our eyes!

Father. Wasn't it?—He's a very gifted man.

Mother (in a low voice). He will do something big!

Father (in the same tones). Ay, a big man—and one of our family!

Axel (who has advanced towards the foreground with LAURA). So that was your answer, Laura?

Laura. You haven't remembered everything.

Mother. Is there something more? Let us hear some more!

Axel. What did you say, then?

Laura. You know I said that something had held me back a long, long time! I saw well enough that you were fond of me, but I was afraid it was only as you would be fond of a child.

Axel. Laura!

Laura. I am not so clever as—as some others, you know; but I am not a child any longer, because now I love you!

Axel. You are a child, all the same!

Father (to the MOTHER). But what about our arrangements? We were to have gone on our travels at once.

Axel. No, stay with us a few days now! (LAURA makes a sign to him.) Not?

Laura (softly). I would rather be alone with you, now.

Mother. What are you saying, Laura?

Laura. I?—I was saying that I should like to ask you, if you are going abroad now, to take Mathilde with you.

Mother. That is very nice of you, Laura, to remember Mathilde. People generally say that newly-married couples think of no one but themselves.

Father. No, Laura is not like that!

All. No, Laura is not like that!

Laura (gently). Mathilde, forgive me! (They embrace, and LAURA says softly:) I understand you now for the first time!

Mathilde. Not quite.

Laura. I know that I should never have got Axel, but for you.

Mathilde. That is true.

Laura. Oh, Mathilde, I am so happy now!

Mathilde. And I wish you every happiness.

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Axel (taking LAURA'S arm). Now you may go and travel abroad, Mathilde!

Mathilde. Yes!—and my next book shall be a better one.

Axel. Your next—?

[Curtain.]