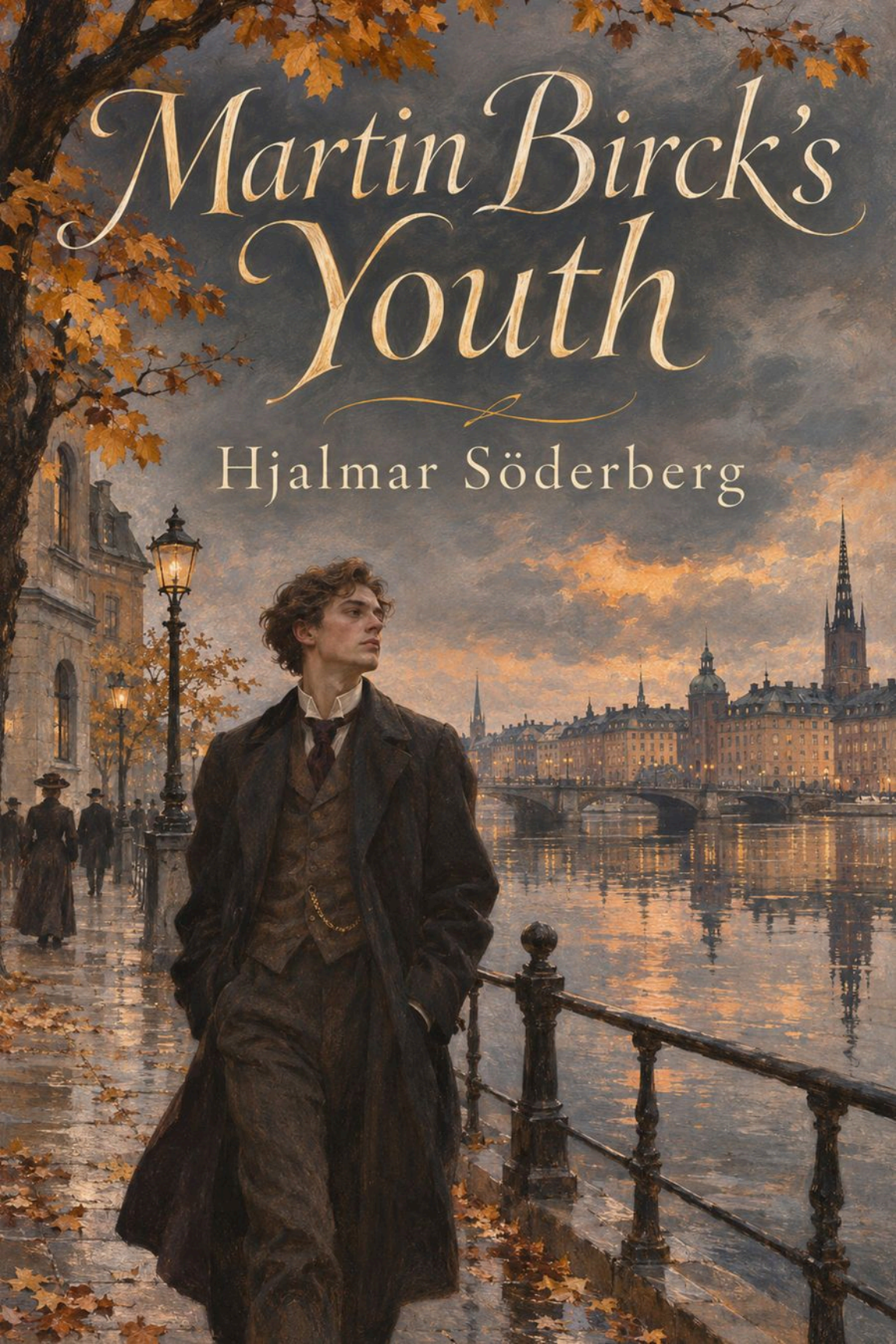

Martin Birck's Youth
Hjalmar Söderberg

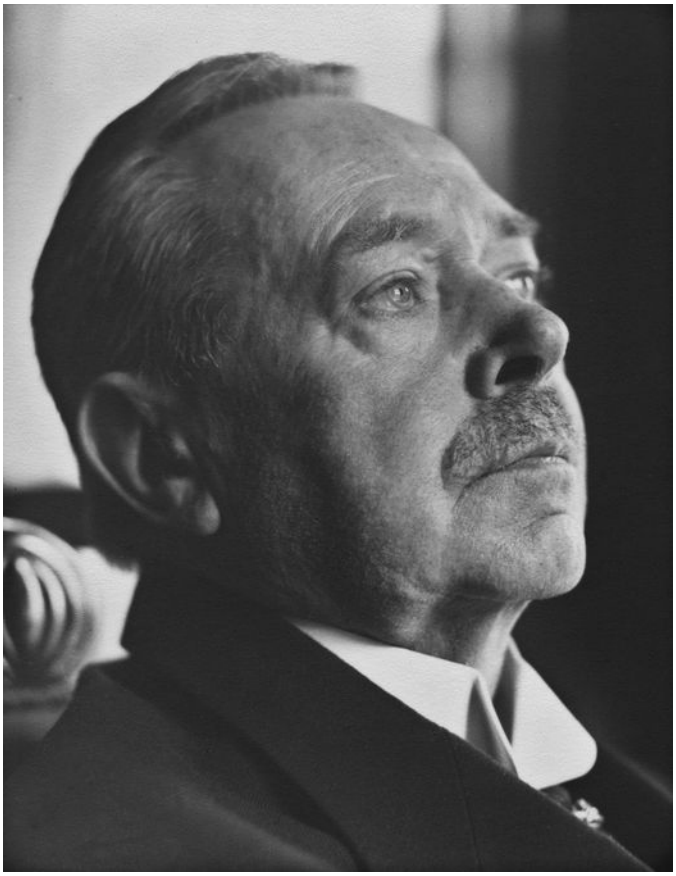
PIPCUB EDITIONS

Martin Birck's Youth

Hjalmar Söderberg

Translated by Charles Wharton Stork

THE AUTHOR



Hjalmar Söderberg

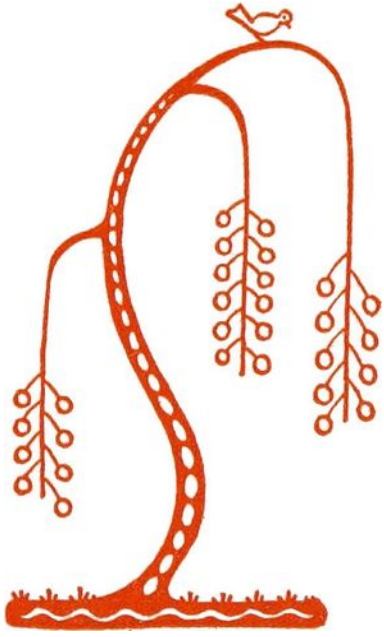
1869 – 1941

Historical portrait. Public domain.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hjalmar Söderberg

Hjalmar Söderberg wrote Swedish novels and stories closely associated with Stockholm. His prose is economical, allowing mood and observation to carry much of the emotional argument. This English edition uses Charles Wharton Stork's translation.



TO

A. G. H. SPIERS

CRITICAL FRIEND

FRIENDLY CRITIC

THIS VOLUME IS CORDIALLY DEDICATED

BY THE TRANSLATOR



PREFACE

It is a sad thought that everyone cannot enjoy Söderberg, that this master of delicate and incisive realism, this prince of humorists, is—for Anglo-Saxons, at least—an acquired taste. But it is well to face at the outset the fact that Söderberg is a European Continental, an Anatole France of Sweden. To those who believe that a man is unvirile or at least anæmic if he refuses to believe in human perfectibility this attitude toward life will seem barren and depressing, one to encourage discouragement. How much pleasanter to feel with Pippa, not only at 7 A.M. on a May morning, but at all hours and seasons, that «all's right with the world»! To insinuate the contrary is to give sanction to those doubts which, if they overtake even the most confident of us at unguarded moments, should all the more be repressed. What is culture if it is not sweetness and light? Listen to Söderberg: «Why all this optimism when not one of the old problems is solved?» And again, one of his characters affirms, «I believe in the lust of the flesh and the incurable loneliness of the soul.»

We read fiction for pleasure. What does this new Swedish novelist offer in compensation for a somewhat despondent view of life? He himself rather hesitates to tell us and in this very hesitation we may, if the faculty be in us, discern one of his chief attractions. Söderberg is reticent because he wishes to present the truth as he sees it without exaggeration and without prejudice. He colors his picture neither with the golden glow of the untroubled believer nor with the red zeal of the revolutionary. He is honest to such a degree that he will not stress his own honesty. On the contrary, he doubts his very doubt: «How could I, a boy of sixteen, be right and all my elders and betters wrong?» And again in MARTIN BIRCK, *«he was not quite certain that*

truth in itself could produce happiness, but history had taught him that illusion created unhappiness and crime.» And yet all the more from this unobtrusiveness we divine the intellectual honesty of the skeptic, which bursts out only once in the present novel: «Would a man never come who did not sing, but spoke, and spoke plainly!» Such a man has the right to «paint the thing as he sees it,» to revalue the time-honored beliefs and customs of the past in the light of his own experience.

We may, I think, trust in Söderberg's fidelity to his vision as in that of few living writers. He collects his data carefully and transmits them simply. In that there is always stimulus to a reader who appreciates how difficult it is to do. But he might do all this and be no more than a good photographer.

As we follow the everyday run of events in Martin Birck, *we may at first be impressed with their perfect verisimilitude and yet incline to class the author as unoriginal. In that respect, though probably in no other, the prose of Söderberg resembles the poetry of Wordsworth. Few readers will progress more than a page or two without that sense of the significant in the commonplace which is the very soul of originality. Söderberg has followed the famous counsel of Flaubert to De Maupassant: «Look at an object until you have seen in it everything that anyone else can see, and then look until you perceive what no one else has seen!» Rarely has any prose been fuller of implications—emotional, psychological, moral—than Söderberg's. To re-read him is invariably to be surprised at all one has missed before. One passes through life with him as one might walk through a meadow with a great naturalist or stroll through a city at night with Whistler. The trivial is clothed with meaning, the habitual is touched with magic. The world of Söderberg lives; it lives in beauty.*

And as one grows more and more conscious of the author's pregnance in matter, one is equally delighted with the perfect consonance of his manner. He gives not only the thing in itself, but the feel of the thing, the overtone. His curious felicity is never

startling or precious, it is simply adequate. How far this may be recaptured in translation may of course be an open question. Here at least is an attempt from the short story MARGOT:

> *It was a cool night in the early part of October. The moon was up; a cold, moist wind was blowing. The big buildings on Blasieholm formed a dark mass, whose broken and irregular edge seemed to be catching at the wisps of cloud that drove forward against a deep-blue background. The still, heavy water of Nybro Inlet mirrored a broad glittering moonpath in oily rings, and along the wharves the lumber sloops raised a thin and motionless forest of masts and tackle. In the upper air was haste and tumult; the clouds hunted each other from west to east, till over the woods of Djurgården they congested into a low black wall. It was as if Heaven were breaking camp for a journey, for a flight.*

The reader of MARTIN BIRCK *will find any number of similar passages, in description, character-drawing and the power of the author to express his own reactions on life and art.*

What manner of man is this quiet interpreter of the life about him? Hjalmar Söderberg was born in Stockholm, 1869. The outward tenor of his way has been uneventful. After trying journalism in a provincial town he tired of «serving caviare to the Bœotians» and returned to his native city, the background of nearly all his work. He first achieved distinction in the «Storiettes,» miniature stories usually told in the first person and based on some casual incident of daily life. In this form he is unsurpassed. MARTIN BIRCK, *his first novel, published in 1907, was partly inspired by «Niels Lyhne,» the work of his elder Danish contemporary, J. P. Jacobsen, but was mainly autobiographical. Söderberg was also influenced by the modern French novelists, especially Flaubert, Maupassant and Anatole France. The last named he translated. He wrote two other novels, «Dr. Glas» and «The Serious Game,» and two plays, «Gertrud» and «The Hour of Fate,» besides numerous collections of short stories. His last long book is «Jehovah's Fire,» an historico-*

religious narrative. Some early poems and a small sheaf of criticism complete the tally of his rather moderate output. Of recent years he has been living in Copenhagen. He has never married.

How little this dry recital of facts has to do with the real case in point! The genius of Söderberg is inherent in the temperament of the man. In appearance he is homely, stoutish, and suave, a bit Bohemian but decidedly a gentleman. Quiet, observant, unpretentious, and rather indolent, he gives an impression of infinite leisure and tolerance which is largely borne out by his writing. His mind is a rich, seemingly passive soil, in which small events take root and grow, as it were, without an effort on his part. Therein lies the unique charm of his stories; their unforced, organic quality.

But in the simplicity of Söderberg there is infinite subtlety. He lets life speak through him because he realizes that in the last analysis nothing speaks as persuasively as life. In his presentation there is a skill beyond praise. With all his naturalism and tranquillity of style, he gives us great moments, moments of profound insight, of wistful loveliness, of quaint and surprising humor. After all, things do not choose themselves or arrange themselves in right relation on the canvas; they only seem to do so. Without obtruding his personality Söderberg speaks to the mind and emotions of his audience in no uncertain terms.

What does he give us finally? First, perhaps, the delight of seeing nature and humanity clearly and the greater delight of entering imaginatively into the essence of both. His truth has the beauty of understanding. We find that life does not need to be idealized to be beautiful; it needs only to be realized. And as a corollary he gives us a sympathy in this manifestation which is not unlike that of Whitman, for it is the sympathy of acceptance. There is a tone of sadness, sometimes of almost tragic depth, in the knowledge of «what man has made of man,» and with it a smile of forgiveness. What we understand we pardon. Men and women are lovable in spite of, largely no doubt because of, their mistakes.

But also men and women are irresistibly funny. Söderberg has almost exactly the mood of Jaques in «As You Like It.» But whereas Jaques is dry, Söderberg is sly, with an ingenuous slyness that never,

as with Sterne, slips off into a leer. How he enjoys letting his people amuse us, in watching with us their self-important gestures, the eternal passions that fade away in a month or a year, their curious delusions about fame and money and respectability! If these people could see themselves! And as we look, we may perhaps be a little mortified to see ourselves. *How foolishly we have wasted our energies and annoyed those about us, for what? Perhaps we shall be a little more lenient to the faults of others from now on. The laughter which Söderberg evokes is thoughtful laughter.*

Are we then given no positive impulse, is there no meaning in life, nothing worth striving for? «Perhaps not,» says Söderberg. And yet, pessimist though he is, he has a reticent pride of his own. He cannot, we feel, tell a lie, cannot force anyone in his stories to do or think anything that is not in character. Furthermore, he adumbrates through the philosophy of Martin the ideal of writing «so that each and all who really cared to could understand him.» And, like most of Söderberg's simple statements, that means considerably more than appears on the surface.

Enough, perhaps more than enough, has been said to indicate the mood for best enjoying Martin Birck. *To call further attention to details would only tend to spoil the pleasure of those attempered to appreciate it. I must return to the original statement that the reader's reaction to it will be peculiarly personal. For myself, I differ almost completely from the author in his conclusions about life, I object strongly to his rather supine attitude, yet I admire and love him. I find him as brilliant as the modern French masters, and much more kindly. He has given me more than have nine-tenths of the worthy authors with whom I agree. There is in him a strict sense of truth, a tenderness, a humor which put him definitely on the side of the angels. He will annoy, will scandalize, many excellent people, but I am afraid I am not sorry that he should. He has been called the* enfant terrible *of Swedish literature. Perhaps we have been taking him too seriously; no doubt he himself will think so. After all, there is something perennially fascinating about a naughty child.*

C. W. S.

THE OLD STREET

—I—

Martin Birck was a little child, who lay in his bed and dreamed.

It was twilight of a summer evening, a green and tranquil twilight, and Martin went holding his mother's hand through a big and marvelous garden where the shadows lay dark in the recesses of the walks. On both sides grew strange blue and red flowers, swaying back and forth in the wind on their slender stalks. He went along holding his mother's hand, looking at the flowers in wonder and thinking of nothing. «You must pick only the blue ones; the red ones are poisonous,» said his mother. Then he let go her hand and stopped to pick a flower for her; it was a big blue flower he wanted to pick, as it nodded heavily, poised on its stem. Such a marvelous flower! He looked at it and smelled it. And again he looked at it with big astonished eyes; it wasn't blue, after all, but red. It was quite red! And such an ugly, poisonous red! He threw the naughty flower on the ground and trampled on it as on a dangerous animal. But then, when he turned around, his mother was gone. «Mamma,» he cried, «where are you? Where are you? Why are you hiding from me?» Martin ran a little way down the walk, but he saw no one and he was near to weeping. The walk was silent and empty, and it was getting darker and darker. At last he heard a voice quite near: «Here I am, Martin. Don't you see me?» But Martin saw nothing. «Here I am all the time. Why don't you come?» Now Martin understood: behind the lilac bush, that was where the voice came from. Why hadn't he realized that at once? He ran there and peeped; he was sure his mother had hidden there. But behind the bush stood Franz from the Long Row, making an ugly face with his thick, raw-looking lips, till he finished by sticking out his tongue as far as he could. And such a tongue as he had; it got longer and longer; there was no end to it; and it was covered with little yellowish-green blisters.

Franz was a little rowdy who lived in the «Long Row» slantwise across the street. The Sunday before he had spat on Martin's new brown jacket and called him «stuck-up.»

Martin wanted to run away, but stood as if rooted to the earth. He felt his legs grow numb beneath him. Then the garden and the flowers and the trees had vanished and he was standing alone with Franz in a dark corner of the yard at home by the ash barrel. He tried to scream, but his throat was constricted....

—II—

But when he woke, his mother was standing by the bed with a clean white shirt in her hand and saying, «Up with you, little sleepyhead; Maria is off to school already. Don't you remember that the pear tree in the yard is to be stripped today? You must hurry if you want to be there.»

Martin's mother had blue eyes and brown hair, and at that time the glance of her eyes was still bright and smiling. She laid the shirt on the bed, nodded to him, and went out.

Maria was Martin's big sister. She was nine. She went to school and already knew what many things were in French.

But Martin still had slumber in his eyes and the medley of the dream in his head, so that he couldn't bring himself to get up.

The curtain was drawn back, and the sun shone straight into the room. The door to the kitchen stood ajar. Lotta was laughing at the kitchen window while she chatted with some one; it was sure to be Heggbom, the porter. Finally Heggbom began to sing down in the yard with his rummy voice.

«If I had King Solomon's treasure chest
With money in heaps and masses,
I'd off to Turkey and never I'd rest
Till I'd bought me a hundred lasses.»

«What would you do with them all,» inquired Lotta; «you that can't manage even your own wife?»

Martin couldn't hear what Heggbom answered, but Lotta began to laugh with all her lungs. «Aren't you ashamed of yourself?» she said.

Now the porter's wife had come into the yard, it sounded as if she was throwing out a tub of dish-water. With that she began to scold Heggbom, and Lotta as well. But Lotta only laughed and slammed the window.

Martin lay half awake, staring at the cracks in the ceiling. There was a crack that was just like Mrs. Heggbom if one looked at it right.

The clock struck nine in the neighboring church, and when it had stopped striking, the clock in the hall began. Martin jumped out of bed and ran to the window to see if the pears were still on the tree.



The pear tree in the yard was beloved by the children and cats. It was old and large, and many of its boughs were already dry and dead, but the others still furnished blossoms and greenery every spring and fruit every autumn.

Heggbom's boys were sitting up in the tree, throwing down pears after having first stuffed their pockets full, while below the other children fought for every pear that fell from the tree. In the midst of the troop stood Mrs. Lundgren, broad of build and loud of voice,

trying to enforce a fair distribution, but no one paid any attention to her. A little way off stood little Ida Dupont, with great eyes, her hands behind her back, not venturing into the turmoil. Mrs. Lundgren did not get any pears for her because she was ill-disposed toward Mr. Dupont, who was a violinist in the royal orchestra.

Martin became eager; he threw on his clothes in a hurry and came down by the steps.

Lotta screamed after him, «Aren't you going to wash and comb your hair before——»

But Martin was in the yard by this time. Mrs. Lundgren at once took him under her protection.

«Throw down a pear to Martin, John. Hold up your cap, little boy, and you shall have a pear.»

A pear fell into the cap. But now Martin couldn't find his penknife to peel the pear.

«Give me the pear; I'll peel it for you,» said Mrs. Lundgren.

With that she took the pear, bit into it with her big yellow teeth, and tore off a piece of the skin. Martin opened his eyes very wide and grew red in the face. Now he didn't want to have any pear at all.

Mr. Dupont lay at his window in his shirt sleeves, smoking a pipe, with a red skull-cap on his head. He now leaned out and laughed. Mrs. Lundgren got angry.

«That's a spoiled child,» she said.

John now triumphantly held up the last pear, and the children hurrahed and shouted, but he stuffed it into his trousers pocket. But then Willie found still another, and this was the very last. He caught sight of Ida Dupont standing with tears in her eyes over by the wall, and at that he gallantly tossed his pear into her apron. Then there was another hurrah; the pear tree was stripped.

Now Mrs. Heggbom came out:

«Lord in heaven what a clatter, and Heggbom lying at his death! Down out of the tree with you, you little ragamuffins!»

Heggbom had been sick in bed awhile ago, and his wife's imagination often turned back to that comparatively happy time.

The boys had come down from the tree. Their mother took John by the hair and Willie by the ear to lead them in. But Mrs. Lundgren felt somewhat huffed; she had to a certain extent presided over the tumult. Furthermore, she enjoyed scolding and therefore did not miss the opportunity of showing Mrs. Heggbom with some sharpness the unsuitability of making such a disturbance. The latter let go her boys so as to set her arms akimbo, and there was a big set-to. Listeners streamed up, and all the kitchen windows were opened wide.

At last a voice broke through the quarreling: «Sh! The Secretary!»

Everything became quiet; Secretary Oldhusen had the largest floor and was the finest tenant of the house. He was dressed in a long tight-fitting frock coat and carried under his arm a worn leather portfolio. When he had come down the steps he stood still and took a pinch of snuff. Thereupon he walked slowly out through the gate with the preoccupied and troubled mien of a statesman.

Martin and Ida slipped out into the street hand in hand. They ventured on for a few steps beyond the gate, then they stood in the street and blinked at the sun.

The street was lined with wooden houses and tile roofs and green trees. The house where Martin lived was the only large stone house on the street. Long Row, diagonally across from it, lay in shadow; a low, dirt-gray range of houses. Only really poor people lived there, Martin's mother said. Only scum, said Mrs. Lundgren. At the dye-house a little farther down the street there was no hurrying; the dyer stood at his gate in slippers and white linen jacket and chatted with his wife in the warehouse. Even outside the corner tavern things were quiet. A brewery wagon had stopped in front of it, and the horse stood with his forefeet tied, eating oats out of a nosebag that hung on his muzzle.

The clock in the near-by church struck ten.

Ida pointed down the street. «There comes the old goat woman.»

The goat woman came with her two goats; one she led with a cord, the other was free. The Secretary's little granddaughter had whooping-cough and drank goat's milk.

«Yes, and there comes the ragman.»

The ragman sidled in through the gate with his pack on his back and his greasy stick. People said he had seen better days.

Two drunken men came out of the tavern and reeled along the street arm in arm. A policeman in white linen trousers walked up and down, a copy of the *Fatherland* sticking out of his hip pocket. A flock of chickens trailed out from the yard of Long Row, the cock at their head. The policeman stopped, took half a roll out of his pocket, and began to feed them.

«What shall we do?» asked Ida.

«I don't know,» replied Martin.

He looked very much at a loss.

«Would you like to have my pear?»

Ida took the pear out of her pocket and held it under Martin's nose. It looked very tempting.

«We can share,» proposed Martin.

«Yes, that's so, we can share.»

«But I have no knife to cut it with.»

«That doesn't matter. You bite first and then I will.»

Martin bit, and Ida bit. Martin forgot he had wanted the pear peeled.

Now somebody called for Martin, and the next moment grandmother came out and took him by the hand.

«What in Heaven's name are you thinking of today? Aren't you going to comb your hair and wash and eat your breakfast? The mischief's in the boy.»

Grandmother was pretending to be cross, but Martin only laughed.

In the gateway they met Heggbom; he was walking a bit unsteadily. He avoided them by a long tack and removed his cap very politely while he spluttered away at his song:

«I'd off to Turkey and never I'd rest
Till I'd bought me a hundred lasses.»

The yard had grown quiet. Mrs. Heggbom's fat red cat lay on the ash barrel purring with half-closed eyes, and below the rats stole in and out.

—III—

On a gray October morning Martin received permission from his mother to go down and play with Ida Dupont.

Mr. Dupont had two small rooms, one flight up. At this time of day he was away at rehearsal, so Martin and Ida were alone.

It was a dark and somber day. The inner room lay in semi-twilight, with a high Venetian blind in front of the window. When one pushed aside a corner of the blind, one could see between two gray house gables a part of the great black church cupola. «Bing bong!» went the bells.

Ida showed Martin a peep-show box with tinted pictures. There were white castles and gardens with colored lanterns in long gleaming rows, yellow and red and blue. There were strange cities with churches and bridges, and steamboats and big ships on a wide river. And there were halls illuminated with radiant candelabra, but what looked like lights were just little holes made with pins. It all looked so big and alive when one saw it in the box. It almost moved; there was surely something magical about it.

«I got that from mamma,» declared Ida.

«But where is your mamma?»

«She's away.»

Martin looked surprised.

«How—away?»

«She has gone off with a strange gentleman. But sometimes she writes me letters that papa reads to me, and sometimes I get pretty things from her that she sends.»

Martin became very inquisitive. He wanted to learn more but didn't know just how he ought to ask.

However, Ida now caught Martin by both shoulders and looked very impressive.

«Do you know what we'll do now?» she asked. «We'll dress up.»

She pulled out a bureau drawer and began to take out red bodices of satin, silk, and rep with a multitude of ribbons and rosettes; silk gloves, silk stockings, and long veils of lace—pink, blue, and white.

«I got this from mamma, too, when she was in the ballet.»

She took a thin, light blue veil with silver spangles and draped it around Martin's head. Then he was given a red bodice, a shawl of silver gauze, and a white skirt.

«My, but you look funny!» said Ida. «Just like a girl.»

Martin looked at himself in the glass and they both roared with laughter.

«Come here,» said Ida, «and I'll put mustaches on you.»

Martin didn't think mustaches would fit, if he was to be a girl. But Ida didn't mind about that; she blackened a cork over a candle and traced big black mustaches on Martin, then she put black eyebrows on herself. After that they looked into the mirror again and laughed.

«It's so handsome to have black eyebrows,» said Ida. «Don't you think I'm handsome?»

«Uhm,» said Martin.

Ida was full of resources.

«If you'll be terribly nice, we'll have a banquet.»

She went to a cupboard and hunted out a half-filled bottle of wine and a couple of green glasses. Then she laid the cloth on a toilet table and filled the glasses.

Martin's eyes grew big.

«Does your papa let you?»

«Oh, yes. He lets me do whatever I like. My papa is nice. Is your papa nice?»

«Yes,» answered Martin.

They clinked glasses and drank. It was a sweet and pleasant wine, and its dark red shone splendidly in the green glasses.

Outside it had begun to snow. There were great heavy flakes; the window sill was already white. It was the first snowfall, and the church bells rang in the black cupola: «Bing bong, bing bong!» Martin

and Ida knelt on a chair with their arms around each other's necks and their noses pressed against the pane.

But Ida poured out more wine and clinked glasses with Martin. Then she took down an old violin from the wall and began to play, and while she played she danced and swayed, wearing a white veil. It sounded very queer the way Ida played the violin. Martin held his ears, laughed, sung, and screamed. But then Martin began to notice a creepy feeling down his back, and he recalled that his mother had said Ida Dupont had fleas.

... Martin was in the sleeping alcove, peeping about. Farthest away in the semi-darkness was an image of the madonna behind two half-burned wax candles, and below hung a crucifix.

Martin stared in astonishment.

«What's that?» he asked.

Ida became very solemn and answered in a low voice, nearly whispering, «That is our religion.»

Mr. Dupont was a Catholic.

«Wait,» said Ida, «sit over there and be quiet, and I'll teach you our religion.»

Ida swathed herself in pink tulle with gold spangles. Then she advanced and lighted the candles under the madonna, two calm bright flames. On a little stand below the crucifix she lighted a pastille of incense. In long blue clouds the incense curled from under the curtain of the alcove, and the air grew heavy with a strong spicy fragrance.

The madonna glowed like a theatre queen with red, blue, and gold, and the stars on her mantle blinked and sparkled in the light of the wax candles.

Martin shivered with delight.

But Ida fell on her knees before the madonna. Her thick, dark-red plaits glowed like bright copper in the candlelight. She muttered something which Martin did not understand, and made strange gestures with her hands.

«What's that?» inquired Martin; «why do you act so?»

«Tst! That is our religion.»

And Ida stayed on in the alcove. Her large black eyes had a sparkling glow. But Martin had an odd feeling of heaviness in the head.

«Come here and join in,» bade Ida. «Don't you think it's beautiful?»

Martin sat down on the edge of the bed and tried to imitate Ida's gestures. But soon he began to nod. His head was so heavy, so heavy.

When Mr. Dupont came home, the two children were lying asleep on the bed. The wax candles had burned out.

—IV—

Autumn advanced over the earth, and in the city where Martin lived the houses were gray and black with rain and smoke, and the days grew shorter.

But when the afternoon came and the dusk fell, Martin Birck's father often sat by the fire and looked at the embers. He was no longer young. He had a smooth-shaven face with sharply marked features, like an actor's or a priest's; and he had a way of laughing to himself without saying anything, which inspired respect and a certain feeling of insecurity. But when he laughed in this way his laugh was not taken for weakness or imbecility by his fellows, for there was nothing satiric in his temperament; he was merely laughing at an anecdote he had read in the morning paper, or at a couple of dogs that had barked at the lions around Charles XIII's statue when he had passed through the square at noon on his way home from the office. For Martin Birck's father was a government clerk. Although his salary was not large and he had no private means, he knew how to arrange things so that he and his family could lead a comparatively carefree existence, for his taste was given only to innocent and simple pleasures, and no feeling of vanity drove him to seek association with people who were above him in rank or fortune. He was the son of a mechanic, and when he chanced to think about his lot in life, he did not compare it with that of his superiors or his wealthy comrades but recalled instead the poor home from which he had come. He decided then that he was lucky and only wished that the luck he had should never be dimmed.

He was fond of his wife and children and loved nothing in the world as much as his home. When he was free from his official duties he liked to work with his hands. He mended broken furniture; he could in an emergency even repair the old kitchen clock, which had flowers painted on its face and great brass weights on chains. He also manufactured funny and ingenious playthings for his children and neat little ornaments for his wife on her birthday. Among these was a little temple of white cardboard. It was adorned with narrow gold borders, and behind a semicircle of slender columns was a mirror, which seemed to double the number of the pillars. A spiral staircase led to the top of the temple, which was surrounded by a balustrade of marbled paper, the staircase being also of cardboard covered with marble; but in the bottom stair was a little drawer which could be pulled out. In this drawer Martin's mother found every year on her birthday a folded banknote or a little piece of jewelry.

He also loved music and song. He liked to sing «Gluntar» with an old student comrade, Uncle Abraham, who sometimes came to visit him, and he could improvise on the piano and play by ear various pieces from his favorite operas.

But he seldom read anything except his paper.

Martin Birck's mother, when twilight fell, often sat at the piano and sang to her own accompaniment. She had the sweetest of voices. The songs she sang were such as no one sings any more. At these times Martin and Maria would stand behind her stool and listen entranced; sometimes they tried to join in. There was a song about a soldier treasuring a canteen from which he had given a dying prince a drink on the field of battle. «'Twas from that His Highness drank,» was the refrain. And there was another song about a shepherdess who was tending her flock in a defile among the Alps. Suddenly she heard the roar of an avalanche and hurried to her charges: «Run fast, run fast, my lambs!» As Martin's mother sang, her hands glided over the

yellowed keys of the instrument. The strings had a brittle, glassy sound, and the pedals sighed and groaned. A string was broken in the bass, and it would buzz now and again.



There was a sense of loneliness when she had stopped singing.

Martin was drifting here and there. The room seemed to grow larger and more empty when twilight came. Finally he turned to grandmother, who was sitting by the window reading the Stockholm *Journal*.

«Tell us a story, please, grandmother,» Martin begged.

But grandmother didn't know any new stories, and the old ones Martin had heard many times before. Grandmother continued to read the paper with her glasses far down on her nose.

«Lord deliver us,» she suddenly exclaimed, looking up from the paper, «did you see there's a Miss Oldhusen has died?»

«No, is she dead?» remarked Martin's father.

«Do you suppose she was a sister of the Secretary?»

«Goodness, no; she was his aunt,» said grandmother. «Her name was Pella, Pella Oldhusen. I remember her very well, I met her at Vaxholm. A plaguy smart and amusing woman she was, but she was a

kleptomaniac. Her acquaintances used to say, ‹Be careful, my dear, and don't leave anything around loose this evening; Pella Oldhusen's coming!› There was a girl she took up. When the girl was to be got ready for her first communion, Miss Oldhusen stole her old housekeeper's linen underskirts that hung in the same wardrobe with her own clothes and had them made up for the girl. It's God's own truth; I heard it from a lady that knew all about her and the whole family. ‹Look here, Miss Oldhusen,› the housekeeper said to her, for she had been with her many years and knew her peculiarities; ‹look here, Miss Oldhusen, there's been thieves in the wardrobe! And the mischief's in it, they've stolen all my underskirts, but not yours, though they were hanging side by side.› ‹Could anyone imagine such rascals?› said Pella. ‹That's frightfully annoying, but what can I do about it?› Just the same she gave the housekeeper money for new linen a while afterward, for she was well off and not stingy neither; but the girl went to the blessed Lord's Supper in the stolen underskirts.»

Martin and Maria listened with wide-open mouths. Grandmother had told a story, after all. Of such stories she knew plenty.

Father had lighted a cigar and pushed his chair nearer the fire. He now motioned to Martin and Maria: «Come, children, now we'll play.»

The blaze had almost burned out. Father broke apart two or three empty match boxes and built out of the fragments a house away deep in the porcelain stove. He put in a lot of matches as pillars and beams and lastly twisted up a bit of stiff paper; that was a tower. At the top of the twist he cut a hole for a chimney. All this was now a stately castle like the old Stockholm castles in Dahlberg's *Swedish Monuments*. When it was done, father set fire to all the corners.

It hissed and sputtered and burned.

«Look—just look how it's burning!—now the farthest corner is catching—now the eastern gate's on fire, now it's falling!—and the tower's burning, the tower's tumbling——»

«Now it's over.»

«Again, papa,» begged Martin. «Oh, again! Just once more!»

«No, not just once more,» said father; «it's no fun the second time.»

Martin begged and implored. But father went over to the piano and stroked his wife's hair.

Martin remained sitting in front of the fire. His cheeks burned but he couldn't tear himself away. It flamed and glowed so finely away in there. It glimmered and glowed and burned.

Finally grandmother came, shut the damper, and put down the slats. Then Martin went to the window.

The sun was gone long ago. It had cleared a while, but murky cloud masses were driving along in broken lines over the thin, glassy blue of the sky. Long Row lay in deep twilight. The lindens and cherry trees of the garden were stripped of leaves, and here and there a light was already gleaming in a window from out the dark net of boughs. Down on the street the lamplighter went about his task; he was old and bent, and had a leather cap which came far down over his forehead. Now he came to the lamp just in front of the window on the opposite side of the street; when he had lighted it, the whole room brightened. The white lace curtains outlined their broken pattern on the ceiling and walls, while the calla lilies and fuchsias painted fantastic shadows.

It grew darker and darker.

One could see so far up above—far off over the low buildings of the old suburb with its wooden houses and gardens. One could see Humlegård Park with the roof of the rotunda between the old naked lindens. And farthest off in the west rose a gray outline, the Observatory on its hill.

The deep and empty blue of the October heavens became still more deep and still more empty. Toward the west it was suffused with a red that looked dirty with mist and soot.

Martin traced outlines with his finger on the pane, which had begun to be damp.

«Will it soon be Christmas, grandma?»

«Oh, not for a good bit, child.»

Martin stood a long while with his nose pressed against the pane staring at the sky, a melancholy twilight sky with clouds of pale red and gray.

—V—

But when the lamp was lighted and they sat around the table, each with his own work or book or paper, Martin went off and sat in a corner. For he had suddenly become sad without knowing why. There he sat in the dark, staring in at the circle of yellow light in which the others sat and talked, while he felt himself outside, abandoned and forgotten.

It did not help that Maria hunted out an old volume of *Near and Far* to show him Garibaldi and the war in Poland and Emperor Napoleon III with his pointed mustaches; he had seen them all many times. Nor did it help that she gave him a piece of paper and taught him to fold it into the shape of a salt-cellar, a crow, or a catamaran; for, though he did not know it, Martin only longed for some one to say or do something that would make him cry. It was therefore he sat moody and silent, listening to the rain that whipped against the window, for it had begun to rain again, and the wind shook the glass.

What was that? Did he suddenly hear father say to mother: «Perhaps you're right that we ought to try to sell the piano and buy a pianino on instalment. It goes out of tune in a couple of weeks, and a pianino would be prettier.»

Martin gave a start at the words «sell the piano.» He had no clear idea of what a pianino was, but he didn't believe it could be a real piano; he pictured it rather as something that was worked with a handle. He didn't believe any other instrument could sound as beautiful as their piano. He loved every dent and every crack in the red mahogany frame, for he himself had made most of them, and he remembered almost every key from its special color. Sell the piano! To his ears it sounded like something impossible. It was almost as if he had heard his parents calmly sitting and talking about selling grandmother and buying an aunt instead.

Martin began to cry before he knew it.

«Mamma,» said Maria, «Martin's crying.»

«What are you crying for, Martin?» his mother asked.

Martin only sobbed.

«He's tired and sleepy,» declared grandmother. «He'd better go to bed.»

While Martin, still sobbing, made the rounds to say good night, Lotta came in with the tea-tray. She had a very solemn expression as she said, «I'm sorry to have to tell you that Heggbom is dead.»

Everything became silent in the room. Martin stopped crying.

Grandmother clasped her hands together: «Well, and has he really passed away? Has it come that suddenly?... Glory be! and has he passed away? Ah, 'twas the brandy!... But it was for the best that he should die, though 'twill be hard for the missus; he was the porter, anyway, and maintained his wife and children.»

«He died just at seven,» said Lotta.

But when no one said anything she went out into the kitchen again.

«It might be a good idea to send out a list to the neighbors and start a little subscription,» said mother.

Martin was sent to bed. His mother sat at the side of his bed and said prayers with him. He was let off with «God Who hast us in Thy care,» because he was so tired. Otherwise he used to say «Our Father» and «Lord, let Thy blessing rest upon us» besides.

Martin lay awake a long time listening to the rain as it plashed against the window, for he was not at all sleepy; he had only said so to get out of the long prayers that he didn't understand. It is impossible for a little child to associate any idea with such expressions as «hallowed be Thy name» or «Thy kingdom come.» He lay thinking about Heggbom and wondering if he could get to heaven. He always smelled of brandy.

Martin was afraid of the dark. When Lotta came in with a lighted candle to fix something in the room, he asked her to let the candle stay.

«You must sleep, Martin,» said Lotta. «Heggbom will come and bite you if you don't.»

With that she went out and took the candle.

Martin began to cry afresh. The wind whistled in the window chinks, every now and then a gate was shut with a bang, and a dog howled outside. Before mother drew the curtains Martin thought there was a red glow in the sky. Perhaps there was a fire in South Stockholm....

There was turmoil and clamor down on the street. Drunken men coming out of the tavern—blows and screams. Heavy steps on the pavement, some one running and some one pursuing—and a cry of «Police, police!»

Martin drew the covers over his head and cried himself to sleep.

—VI—

White winter came with sleigh bells and snow and ice-flowers on the windowpane. «They are the dead summer flowers come back again,» said Martin's mother. Evergreen forests out in the country came from the darkness and solitude into the city streets and squares, and when the Christmas bells rang in the holy day, there stood in Martin's home a dark and timid fir which smelt of the woods, till evening came and it stood a-glitter with candles, white candles and colored candles, and was covered with winter apples and sugar-plums with mottoes which were so stupid that even Martin and Maria could see how stupid they were. All the glory of Christmas passed—it was like turning the page of a picture-book—and the star of New Year's Eve was burning across the white roofs, and people said to each other, «Good night, and thanks for the year!» With a shivering sensation Martin thought of the line of gray winter days that were waiting, to which he could see no ending, for it was interminably long till summer, and still longer till next Christmas.

New Year's morning he was waked while it was still dark to go to early service. Half asleep he scrambled through the snow by the side of his parents, and as they came around the corner, there stood the church like a giant lantern shining out across the white square where people were crawling in across the snow from all directions. Within the church was the organ's roar and singing and many shining candles, and Martin felt happy and good and thought this was just the right way to begin the new year; and when the minister began to preach, he went straight to sleep. But when he woke up, the pale hue of dawn was shining in through the windows in the cupola and his mother roused him with, «Now we'll go home and drink our coffee.»

So then they went home, their hearts full of the most beautiful intentions, for Martin understood without telling that it was this sort of thing the minister had preached about. Later in the morning Martin and Maria were sent around on the New Year's visits to Uncle Jan and Aunt Louisa and other uncles and aunts, where they were given cakes and wine and sugar-plums from the Christmas trees. But at Uncle Abraham's there was no Christmas tree, for he was a widower and had no children but lived alone with an old housekeeper. Uncle Abraham was a doctor and had often cured Martin and Maria of measles and scarlatina and pains in the chest. He had a black beard and a long crooked nose, for he was a Jew. He had also a parrot that could swear in French, and a black tomcat. The cat was named Kolmodin and he was the cleverest cat in the world, for when he was outside the office door and wanted to get in, he didn't mew as other cats do, but got up on his hind feet, caught his claws in the bell-cord, and pulled it hard. This year when Martin and Maria came to wish Uncle Abraham a Happy New Year, he was sitting alone with his bottle of wine on the table playing chess with himself.

The room was large and half dark and full of books. Outside the snow was falling in great flakes. Uncle Abraham stuffed their pockets full of goodies, made the parrot swear in French, and was very cordial; but he didn't say much, and in front of the fire which glowed in the porcelain stove sat the cat Kolmodin staring gloomily at his master. Martin and Maria stood silent and looked at each other with a feeling

of oppression. For they had more than once heard their parents say that Uncle Abraham was not a happy man and that he never was really cheerful.

—VII—

So now it was the new year. The almanac which Martin had given his father for Christmas had a red cover, whereas the old one had been blue. Martin also found to his surprise and disappointment that this was the only difference he could see between the new year and the old, that the days passed as they had passed before with ringing of bells and snow and a somber sky, with weariness of the old games and the old stories, and with the longing to be big. He longed for that time but feared it too. For his mother had often pointed at the ragman who had seen better days and said that if Martin wouldn't eat his porridge or his beer-soup and otherwise be a good and obedient boy, he would come to be just such a ragman when he was big. When he heard his mother talk so, he would feel a tightening of the chest and would see himself slinking in through the gate at dusk with a pack on his back and poking in the ash barrel with a black stick, while father and mother and sister and grandmother were sitting together around the lamp as before. For it never occurred to him to think that his home could be broken up and dispersed.



Snow fell, a great deal of snow. The drifts grew, and it became sparklingly cold. Martin had to keep indoors with his alphabet book and multiplication tables, with his color-box and jumping-jacks and all splendid things—already faded—which Christmas had left behind. Among the jumping-jacks there was one called the Red Turk which he was fonder of than the others, because Uncle Abraham, who had given it to him, had said it was the jolliest jumping-jack in all the world. «You see,» he had said one evening, «in itself it is neither amusing nor remarkable that an old pasteboard man kicks about when one pulls the strings. But the Red Turk is no common pasteboard man; he can think and choose the same as we. And when you jerk the strings and he begins to prance, he says to himself: ‹I am a being with free will, I kick just as I want to and exclusively for my own entertainment. Hoho! there's nothing so delightful as to kick.› But when you stop jerking the string, he decides that he is tired and says to himself: ‹To the deuce with the kicking! The finest thing there is is to hang on a hook on the wall and stay entirely still.› Yes, he is the jolliest jumping-jack in the world.»

Martin didn't understand much of this, but he understood that the Red Turk was amusing and set greater store by him than ever.

So the days passed, and with Twelfth Night began small family parties with stripping of Christmas trees and shadow games and doll theaters and magic lanterns with colored pictures on a ghostly white sheet. On the way home the stars sparkled, and father pointed to the heaven and said, «That's the Milky Way, and there is the Dipper.»

—VIII—

But one morning when Martin awoke he saw that the heavens shone with a brighter blue than they had for a long time and that there was a dripping from the eaves and the naked branches of the pear tree. And while he was sitting up in bed looking out at the shining blue, Maria came in with a branch that seemed to blossom in a hundred colors; but it was not flowers—it was tinted feathers. She flicked him with the branch and danced and sang that it was Shrove Tuesday and she had a holiday from school, hurrah! And there were to be buns with almond icing for dinner.

Then they took the feathers off the branch and dressed up in them and played Indians and white men, but they were both Indians.

But mother took the switch and set it in the window in a jug filled with water in the full sunlight. The room faced the east and this was the morning sun. And lo and behold! it wasn't many days before brown-and-greenish buds came out here and there on the twigs, they swelled and grew larger, until one day they had broken out and changed into frail light-green leaves; the whole branch had become verdant, and it was spring.

One afternoon a beam of sunlight fell into the hall which faced the west.

«Look at the sun, children,» said mother. «That's our first afternoon sun this year.»

The sunbeam fell on the polished glass of the candelabra, where it broke and strewed rainbow-colored patches all over the room on the furniture and wall paper. Just then father passed through the hall and set the three-sided bits of glass in motion with a slight blow of his hand. There was a tumultuous dance of the colored patches around the walls, a dance as of fluttering butterflies. Martin and Maria began a chase after them. They ran till they were flushed and hot, striking their hands against the walls, and when they saw a patch on their hand instead of on the wall paper, they screamed with delight, «Now I've got it!»

But in the next second it glided away, the sunbeam paled, and the butterflies, weary of fluttering and shining, departed—Martin saw the last of them expire on his hand.

But it wasn't spring yet after all.

The snow fell again, wet snow that melted at once and was dirty at once; again the bells rang in the black cupola, and it was Good Friday. Martin and Maria were in church, but they might not sit with their parents, for their parents sat far away in the choir in a multitude of solemn-looking people dressed in black. They were dressed in black themselves, father in a frock coat with a white cravat, and everything was black: the red on the pulpit and altar was gone, and there was black instead; the priests had black capes, a black cross rose menacingly from the leaden-hued cloud of the altar-piece far away in the dusk of the choir, and black-gray sky lay above all, staring in through the belfry windows of the cupola. Martin could not go to sleep as usual, because everything was so uncanny: the choir moaned and lamented, the minister looked sinister and forbidding and talked about blood, and a dog howled out in the churchyard....

Martin was delighted with all this, although he didn't realize it.

Spring at last, real spring.... It came first when the Royal Family drove out to the big park with their plumed and golden equipage. How the whole day shone, how radiant it was with blue and sunshine and spring around the chimneys and roofs, around the weathercock on the

church tower! In Martin's street the lindens were already out, and over the leaning fences hovered clouds of white blossom, cherry blossom, and hawthorn. On the square and along the Avenue the people thronged, the whole city was out in bright and gay-colored costumes, and in front of the Life Guards' barracks stood the light blue guardsmen, whom Martin loved and worshiped, on duty with sabers drawn. The Royal Family drove past in a cloud of plumes and gold, the crowd cheered and Martin cheered, and then everybody went out to the park to drink fruit juices and mineral water at Bellmansruh. All around whined violins and street-organs, and Martin felt completely happy. But on the way back they stopped a moment to look at the Punch and Judy theater. The landscape was already beginning to darken, but people still flocked around the puppet theater where Punch was just going to beat his wife to death. Martin pressed close to his mother. He saw mouths open in a broad laugh around him in the dusk; he understood nothing, but the sound of the cudgel on the doll's head frightened him—were people laughing at that bad man there beating his wife? Then came the creditor, and him too Punch beat to death. The policeman and the devil he treated similarly, till finally Death lured him into his cauldron, and that was the end. Martin couldn't laugh or weep either; he only stared abashed and terrified into this new world, which was so unlike his own. On the way home he was cold and tired. The sun was gone, it grew darker and darker; the king had long since driven home to his castle, and drunken men scuffled and bawled around him. The anemones which Martin had picked at the edge of the wood were withered, and he threw them away to be trampled into the mire.

But when he was home at last and it was night and Martin lay in his bed asleep, he dreamed that father hit mother on the head with a big cudgel.

—IX—

Summer skies and summer sun, a white house with green trees....

Martin's parents had rented several low-ceiled rooms with rickety white furniture and the bluest window-blinds in the world for the small square windows. Close to these windows passed the state highroad. Here wagoners and wayfarers from the islands of the Malar went by continually to and from the city, all stopping to pay the bridge toll, for the white house belonged to the bridge-tender and stood just at the abutment of Nockeby bridge. The bridge-tender sat every evening on his porch, which was twined about with hop vines, drinking toddy, holding out his money-box to the passers-by, chatting and telling yarns, for he had been a sea captain and voyaged to many strange lands. But now he was a little old white-haired man, who had for many years had the tenancy of the bridge and had become a well-to-do citizen.

On the evening of the first day, when the packing boxes, trunks, and clothes-baskets were still standing higgledy-piggledy in the room,—which still looked a little strange, though every wardrobe and chair, every flower in the wall paper seemed to say, «We shall soon get acquainted,»—and while the evening meal with butter and cheese and some small broiled fish was spread by the window, Martin sat silent on the corner of a chest surveying the strange and new picture: the gray highroad with telegraph poles in which the wind sang, and the dark shadowy figures of the horses and peasants outlined against the greenish-blue western sky. Obliquely across the way a little to one side was a slope with a clump of oaks, whose verdure stood out strong and heavy in the summer twilight. Among these oaks was one that was naked and black and could not put out leaves like the others, and in its branches the crows had built a nest.

Martin could not take his eyes from this black tree with the crow's nest between the branches. He thought he knew this tree, that he had seen it before, or heard a story about it.

And he dreamed of it that night.

Summer skies, summer days. Green fields, green trees....

The fields were full of flowers, and Martin and Maria picked them and tied them up in bouquets for their mother. And Maria said to Martin: «Look out for snakes! If you step on a snake, he'll think you did it on purpose, and then he'll bite you.» So Martin trod as carefully as he could in the high grass. She taught him too that it was a great sin to pick the white strawberry blossoms, because it was from them the strawberries grew. They agreed that the first one who saw a strawberry blossom should say, «Free for that one!» And the one who had said it should then have the right to pick it when it was ripe. But when they came to the slope with the oaks, it was all white with blossoms under the trees. Maria, who was the first to see it, cried, «Free for the whole lot!» But when she saw that Martin did not look pleased, she immediately proposed that they should divide the treasure, so they drew an imaginary line from one tree to another and in this way divided the whole slope into two parts. To the right of the line was Maria's strawberry field and to the left was Martin's. After that they sat down in the shade of an oak and arranged their flowers as they thought best, and Maria taught Martin to stick in some fine heart-shaped grass among the buttercups and ox-eye daisies and to tie up the bouquets with long straws. But Martin soon grew tired with his flowers, for he had forgot he had picked them to give to his mother. He let them lie in the grass and lay down on his back among them to look at the clouds that were drifting across the blue heavens high above his head. They were like white dogs, small shaggy white dogs. Perhaps they were white dogs. When people die, they go to heaven; but dogs, who have no regular soul, can't very well get so high up. They can jump around outside and play with each other. But their masters must come out to them sometimes, and then the little dogs leap up on their masters and lick them and are ever so happy....

White clouds, summer clouds.

But the finest thing of all was the long bridge and the lake and all the steamboats that blew their whistles when they were still far off so that the bridge should open and let them through. Martin soon taught

himself to know them all: the *Fyris*, the *Garibaldi*, the *Bragë*, which was never in a hurry; the lovely blue *Tynnelsö*, and the brown *Enköping*, which was called the *Coffee-pot*, because it sputtered like boiling coffee. Each boat had for him its particular expression, so that he could distinguish them one from another a long way off. They helped him to keep account of the time too. When the *Tynnelsö* was passing through the bridge, it was time to go home and have breakfast; and when the *Runa* blew with its hoarse throat, the *Bragë* was not far away, and it was in the *Bragë* that papa came from the city. There were tow-boats too with their long lines of barges; these barges often got stuck in the gap of the bridge, and nothing in the world was so much fun as to hear the bargemen swear. But on days when the lake was green, with white foam, and the waves plashed high up over the bridge, no steamboats could vie with the coasting sloops for first place in Martin's heart. In every skipper he saw a hero who defied wind and wave to reach some strange, unknown port, for it never occurred to him to think that they only sailed to Stockholm to sell the wood, hay, or pottery they had on board. These cargoes, however, did not quite please him, for he could not help their suggesting against his will some dark suspicion of an ulterior motive in the skipper, and in the depths of his heart he liked best the sloops that came empty from the city. Then too these danced most boldly over the waves, and they steered toward regions where Martin had never been, far beyond Tyska Botten and Blackeberg—which were the boundary of the known world.

It was there too that the sun went down every evening in a red and glittering land of promise. Martin was entirely certain it was just there the sun went down, right behind the cape, and not anywhere else. He could see it all so plainly. He did not, however, imagine that the people living over there could see the sun at close range or that they need be afraid of its falling on their heads. If another boy had come to him and said such a thing, Martin would have thought him very stupid. For it is just the same with children as with grown-ups: they often form the strangest conceptions of the world; but if any one shows them the consequences of their ideas, they say he is very stupid, or that it is improper to joke about serious things.

Summertime, strawberry time.

At that period summer was different from now. There was a joy that filled the days and evenings, pressing even into one's nightly dreams; and morning was joy personified. But one morning Martin awoke earlier than usual, and when he heard a little bird twittering in the privet hedge before his window and saw the sun was shining, he sat up in bed and wanted to dress and go out. Then his mother came in and said he was to lie still a little while yet, because it was his birthday, and Maria was working at something outside which he mustn't see before it was ready. She kissed him and said that now he was seven he ought to be really industrious and good in the summer, so that he wouldn't need to be ashamed in the autumn when he was to begin school. But when Martin heard the word «school,» he forgot the bird twittering on the hedge and the sun that was shining, and his throat felt choked as if he was going to cry; but he controlled himself and didn't cry. He didn't know very clearly what «school» meant, but it sounded very harsh and hard.

To be sure his mother had school for him and Maria, but that was only for a short while every day down in the garden, in the lilac arbor, where butterflies flitted, yellow and white and blue, and bees hummed, while his mother told them stories about Joseph in Egypt and about kings and prophets, and taught them to make letters after a model. He comprehended that real school must be something quite different. But while his heart was troubled over having to start school in the autumn, they all came in and congratulated him on his birthday: papa and grandmother and Maria, and Maria put on an affected manner and said with a bow, «I have the honor to congratulate——» But Martin became bashful and blushed and turned his face to the wall.

Then they left him alone. But it wasn't long before grandmother stuck in her head and called that the king was coming riding with fifteen generals to congratulate Martin, and at the same moment he heard a rumbling over the bridge as if there was thunder. He jumped out of bed and threw on his clothes, but the noise came nearer, there

was a cloud of dust over the road, horses' hoofs rang on the ground and the bridge, and there were lightnings of drawn swords. When he came out on the porch, the foremost riders had already passed, but Martin's mother consoled him with the fact that the king had not been with them. Instead it had been almost all his army, which was on its way to the region of Drottningsholm for maneuvers. There were hussars and dragoons and all the artillery from Stockholm, and the artillerists were shaking like sacks of potatoes on their caissons and were gray and black with dust and dirt. But Martin admired them all the more in that condition and wondered within himself if it wouldn't be better to be an artillerist than a coasting skipper.

The martial array passed and was gone, a fresh wind came from the lake and took with it the odor of dirt and sweat which remained, and when Martin turned around, there stood beside the breakfast table a little table set especially for him; Maria had decorated it with flowers and green leaves. Then he got bashful and blushed again, but he was very happy too, for on the middle of the table stood a cake which his mother had baked for him, a big dish full of wild strawberries which Maria had picked under the oaks, a twenty-five-öre piece from papa, and a package of stockings which mother had knitted. Of all these things Martin cared most for the twenty-five-öre piece. For he had come to realize that a pair of stockings was just a pair of stockings, and a cake was a cake, but a twenty-five-öre piece was an indefinite number of fulfilled wishes in any direction whatever up to a certain limit, and experience had not yet taught him how narrow was that limit.

Martin went around and thanked everybody, and tasted the cake and the berries, and saw that the stockings were handsome with red borders, and put the twenty-five-öre piece in a match box, which was his savings bank. In it up to now there had been a couple of old copper coins and some small pebbles which he had come across in the sand and kept because they were so pretty.

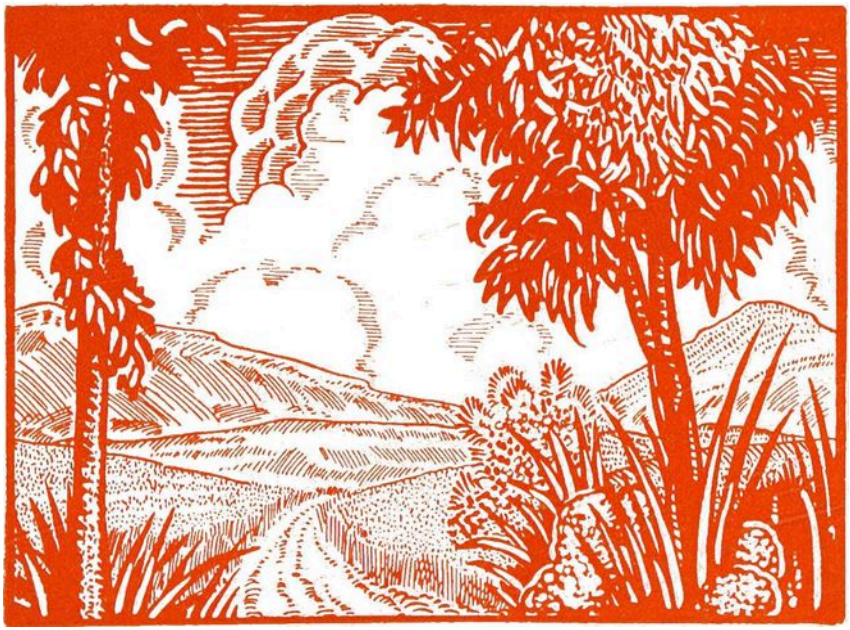
Then the *Bragë* blew at Tysk Botten, and papa had to be off to the city, but Martin was allowed to go with mamma and grandmother and Maria to Drottningsholm. There stood the king's white summer palace, mirrored in the bright inlet. The trees in the park were bigger

than any other trees, and the shade under them was deep and cool. And over the dark waters of the ponds and canals the white swans glided with their stiffly outstretched necks, and Martin imagined that they never troubled themselves about anything else in the world than their own white dreams.

But grandmother had a French roll with her, which she broke into crumbs and fed to them as one feeds chickens.

Summer days, pleasure days, cornflowers in the yellow rye....

It was near harvest time, and Martin was walking along the road with his mother. Maria was on the other side, and now and then she would pick a cornflower from out of the rye. Mother had a pink dress and a straw hat with a wide brim, and she was talking with them about mankind and the world and God.



«Look, Martin,» she said, «there are the heavy and the light ears of grain that we read about today in the arbor. You remember the full ear that bowed itself so deeply to the earth because it had so many grains to carry. The grains are ground into meal in the mill, and the meal is

baked into bread, and the bread is good to eat when any one is hungry. But the empty ear is good for nothing, the farmer throws it away or gives it to his horse to chew, and even the horse doesn't get any fatter from it. And yet it raises itself so proudly aloft and looks down on the other ears which stand and bend around it.»

With that mother broke off the proud light ear and showed Martin that it was quite empty.

«Such are many among men,» she said. «You'll come to see that when you're big. You will also see people who go about hanging their heads to make others think they belong to the full ears. But they are just the emptiest of all.

«But you must also remember, children, that it is not your part to judge, either now or when you grow up, whether any one belongs to the full or the empty ears. Such a thing no man can rightly know about another. That only God knows.»

When mother talked to Martin about God, he felt at the same time solemn and a little embarrassed, somewhat as a little dog might feel when one tries to talk to him as to a person. For when he heard his mother tell about paradise and Noah's ark, he could follow along very well—he saw it all so clearly before his eyes, the apple tree and the serpent and all the animals in the ark. But at the word «God» he could not picture anything definite, either an old man or a middle-aged man with a black beard. At the very top of the blue dome in the church cupola was a great painted eye, and mother had said this was a symbol of God. But this solitary eye seemed to Martin so uncanny and sad. He hardly dared look at it, and it did not at all help him to comprehend what God really looked like. He had also had to learn by heart the Ten Commandments, which God had written for Moses on Mt. Sinai. But they seemed only to strengthen his secret suspicion that God was something that only concerned the grown-ups. It never could be to Martin that God spoke when he said, «Thou shalt have no other gods but me.» Martin knew neither what an idol looked like nor what one could do to worship it. That he should honor his parents came of itself. He felt no temptation to murder or to steal or to covet his

neighbor's maid-servant, his ox, or his ass. And he had no idea how he could commit adultery; but he resolved he would try to guard against it anyway, to be on the safe side.

«God knows everything, both the present and the future. He Himself has ordained it all. And when you pray to God, Martin, you must not believe that you with your prayers can in the slightest alter His will. But still God wishes men to pray to Him, and therefore you must do it. You must never give up saying your evening prayer before you go to sleep, no matter how big and wise you get. But when you become big and have to look out for yourself in the world, you must never forget that you must depend first and foremost on yourself. God helps only him who helps himself. And if it ever happens in life that there is something you desire deeply, so that you think you can never be happy again unless you get it—then you must not pray to God to give it to you. Try rather to get it for yourself; but if that is impossible, then pray Him for strength to renounce your wish. He does not like other kinds of prayer.»

So Martin Birck's mother spoke as they walked along. And the summer wind whispered around them and passed on over the field, and the grain waved.

The bridge-tender, old Moberg, had an assistant by the name of Johan. Johan was fourteen or fifteen and soon became Martin's best friend. He made bows and arrows and bark boats for Martin, and Martin helped him to wind up the drawbridge. In the evening, when he was free, he used also to play hide and seek and «There's no robbers in the woods» with Martin and Maria and a few other children. But it was neither on account of the bark boats nor the games that Martin was so fond of Johan and admired him so extraordinarily. It was because Johan always had so many wonderful things to tell about, things that papa and mamma and grandmother never told about. It was especially in the dusk that Johan was wont to be so communicative, when Martin and he sat on a beam by the opening in the bridge and waited for the approaching steamboat,

whose lanterns would sooner or later pop out from behind the cape, first the green and then the red. At such times Johan might tell of this, that, or the other thing. One time it would be about old Moberg, who used to see tiny little devils jumping up and down, up and down, in his toddy glass; it was about them he talked when he sat muttering to himself and stirring his glass. But the minister at Lovö was still worse. Why, he was a friend of Old Spotty himself, the whole parish knew that. Anybody could see that for himself if he thought about it; how otherwise could he get up in the pulpit and preach the way he did for a whole hour; where did he get all his words from? Furthermore Johan had had to go to him one time on an errand and had been in his room and had seen with his own eyes that it was chock-full of books from floor to ceiling. Oh, yes, he was in with the Old Boy sure enough!—Or Johan would tell about a man who had been murdered on the highroad three years back, quite near, and would describe the place exactly: «It was just there where the wood is so thick on one side, and on the other is a willow alongside of a telegraph pole. It was an evening in November that it happened, and now if anybody goes by at the right time, he can hear the most terrible groaning in the ditch—— But they never got the fellow that did it.»

When Martin heard such things, he squeezed close to Johan's arm, and he felt lighter at heart when the steamboat's lanterns shone out of the dark and came nearer, when he heard the thump-thump of the engine and the captain's orders, and they had to hurry to wind up the drawbridge. When they went home across the bridge, they were both excited with thoughts of ghosts and murders, and Johan said to Martin, «Listen, he's after us!»

Martin didn't know whether *he* was the murderer or the murdered, but he fancied he heard steps on the bridge and didn't dare to look around. Johan, however, who had a cheerful disposition, drove off his fear by striking up a jolly song. He sang to the tune of «There was an old woman by Konham Square»:

«I go to my death wherever I go, killivillivippombom!»

And Martin joined in and sang along with him.

But when they got to the bridge-tender's house, Johan was silent while Martin sang at the top of his voice:

«I go to my death wherever I go, killivillivippombom!»

The bridge-tender, old Moberg, was sitting on his porch, which was embowered in hop vines, drinking toddy with two farmers in the light of a round Japanese lantern. He was an old man who drank toddy every evening, and people said he couldn't last much longer. But he was most unwilling to die. If he heard any one speak of illness or death, it was to him as if he had heard something indecent, or indeed it was much worse, for indecent talk rather raised his spirits than offended his ears. But when he saw Martin coming along the road and heard him singing a funeral hymn to the tune of an insolent street song, he got up and advanced along the road with tottering steps till he halted in front of Martin. Martin stopped too and was silent directly. He looked around for Johan, but Johan had vanished.

Old Moberg had become blue in the face, as he said in a trembling voice: «And this child is supposed to come of respectable people! These are strange times, I may say.»

Thereupon he went into the house, without either drinking his toddy or saying good night to the farmers, and went to bed.

But Martin was left alone on the road, and everything around him had become silent all of a sudden. He heard only the sound of the farmers' sticks as they went off in the dark without speaking.

Martin's parents, however, had heard the whole affair from the veranda on the side of the house.

«Martin, come in!»

Martin was as red as his collar was white. Now he'd have to give an account of who had taught him to sing such things. But he said he had thought of it himself. Father explained to Martin how dreadfully he had behaved, and Martin cried and was sent to bed. His mother cried too when she said prayers with him. She was frightened and wrought up. For children's offenses, like those of adults, are judged more according to the scandal they have aroused than according to their inner nature, and Martin's misdeed had caused a terrible scandal.

The most beautiful days of summer were gone. In the daytime there was rain and wind, and the lake turned green. And at dusk the crows flapped around the slope with the oaks and the naked tree.

When it rained, Martin was set to read «The Bee and the Dove» and «The Toad and the Ox.» He read too «Tiny's Trip to Dreamtown.»

«Little gold fishes in goodly row
Swim through the silver sea there.
Tiny is off to Dreamtown, ho!
Ere it is night he'll be there.

«Soon, soon
Close to the moon
He sees its outline fleeting.
Bright, bright
Many a light
Sends him a kindly greeting.

«On glides the ship, it nears the land.
Lamps are a-gleam so pretty
Down at the edge of the murmuring strand,
Bells ring out from the city.»

The city! Tears came into Martin's eyes. He had often thought of the city in the past days and had wondered if everything was the same at home. For in winter Martin longed for the green grass of summer and the strawberries in the woods, but when a flock of summer days had gone by and the green was no longer fresh and the wild roses in the meadows were gray with the dust of the highroad, he dreamed once more of the city's gleaming rows of lamps, of Christmas and snow, and of the gray winter twilight in front of the lighted fire.

—X—

The wheel of the year had gone around, and it was again autumn.

In the city there was much that was new. Long Row was gone with its gardens and sheds; in its place a great brick building rose aloft, growing higher every day, obscuring both the lindens of Humlegård Park and the Observatory on its hill. Everywhere people were pulling down and building up, and dynamite blasts resounded every day in the district, which was now no longer to be called Ladgardsland but Östermalm. And Mrs. Heggbom had become a lady. If anybody called her by her former title, she would answer politely but decidedly, «Not any more!»

Martin went to school, but it was a modest little school and not nearly so terrible as he had thought. One had only to learn one's lessons, and everything went well. And Martin felt with pride that his knowledge of the world was enlarged with every day. Space and time daily extended their boundaries before his eyes; the world was much bigger than he had dreamed and so old that his head grew giddy at the multitude of the years. If one looked ahead, time had no limits—it ran out into a dizzying blue infinity; but if one traced it back, one at least found far back in the darkness a beginning, a place where one had to stop: six thousand years before the birth of Our Saviour it was that God had created the world. That stood clear and plain in Martin's Biblical History, on the first page.

In six days He had made it. But the teacher said that days were longer at that time.

But if possibly the days of the creation had been a little longer than ordinary days, it was just the opposite with Methusalem's nine hundred and sixty-nine years. «At that time, you see, they didn't reckon the years as long as now,» the teacher said.

There was so much new to learn and digest; school had in reality none of those terrors with which Martin had arrayed it in his imagination.

But on the other hand the way to and from school was filled with all sorts of perils and adventures. Those ill-disposed beings who were called rowdies and who called Martin and his comrades stuck-ups might be in ambush around any corner. The worst of these rowdies were the fierce and formidable «marsh rowdies,» who would now and then leave their gloomy habitation in the tract between the

Humlegård and Roslagstorg, the «Marsh,» to go on the war path. Their weapons were said to be lead balls on the end of short ropes. But more than these marsh rowdies, whom Martin had never seen and of whose existence he was not entirely sure, he feared the horrible Franz, who used to live in the Long Row and still resided in the same street. For this rowdy directed all his energies and intelligence toward embittering Martin's life by day and even pursued him into his nocturnal dreams.

But one day when Martin was on his way for morning recess, he found two of his comrades in a fight with Franz at a street corner; in fact they had already overcome him, thrown him down, and were pummeling him with their fists. At this time Martin had begun to read Indian books, so that he at once saw in Franz a parallel to the noble redskin and did not want to miss so favorable a chance of making him his ally against other rowdies. He therefore advanced and represented to his comrades how cowardly it was to fight two against one, said that Franz lived in his street and was a very decent rowdy, and proposed that they let him go in peace. While he thus drew the attention of his comrades, Franz managed to get up and run away.

In return Martin got all the licking intended for Franz. Furthermore he had to endure the scorn of his comrades for being the friend of a rowdy. And the next time he met Franz on the street in front of the dyer's gate, the latter tripped him so that he fell into the gutter, then gave him a bloody nose, tore his books apart, swore at him frightfully, and ran off.

He had not understood that he was supposed to be a noble redskin. But this Franz was not a rowdy of the usual sort; he was a thoroughly awful rowdy.

—XI—

Martin entered the high school.

Here everything was strange and cold. Gray walls, long corridors. The school yard was like the desert of Sahara. When the bell rang for the first recess, Martin slipped off by himself so as to escape his new comrades. But the next recess they gathered around him in a ring,

surveying him for a while in silence, till finally a little red-haired boy with a broad pate opened his mouth to ask, «What sort of devil are you?»

At these words Martin had a dark premonition that a new stage of his life was beginning. He had been as happy as a plant in the earth, as is every little child with kind parents and a good home. Now the doors were opened upon an entirely new world, a world where one could not get on by the same simple means that his father and mother had shown him: *i.e.*, by being polite and friendly towards all he met and never taking advantage of others. Here the thing was to decide quickly and firmly in what case one should use one's fists, in what one should take to one's heels, and under what circumstances one could benefit by cunning and deceit. It was not long, either, before Martin got the way of things. He suddenly remembered various curses and ugly words that he had heard from the bridge-tender's assistant in the country, and he missed no opportunity of fitting them in here and there in conversation with his associates wherever he thought they would go. In this way he became sooner acquainted with the other boys, and they in return enlightened him in much that a newcomer might find useful: *e.g.*, which of the teachers flogged and which only gave bad marks; that the worst of all was Director Sundell, who had mirrors in his spectacles so that he saw what was done behind his back and always wore galoshes so that he couldn't be heard in the corridors; that «Sausages» was decent, though he marked hard, but that «The Flea» was a damned sneak.

—XII—

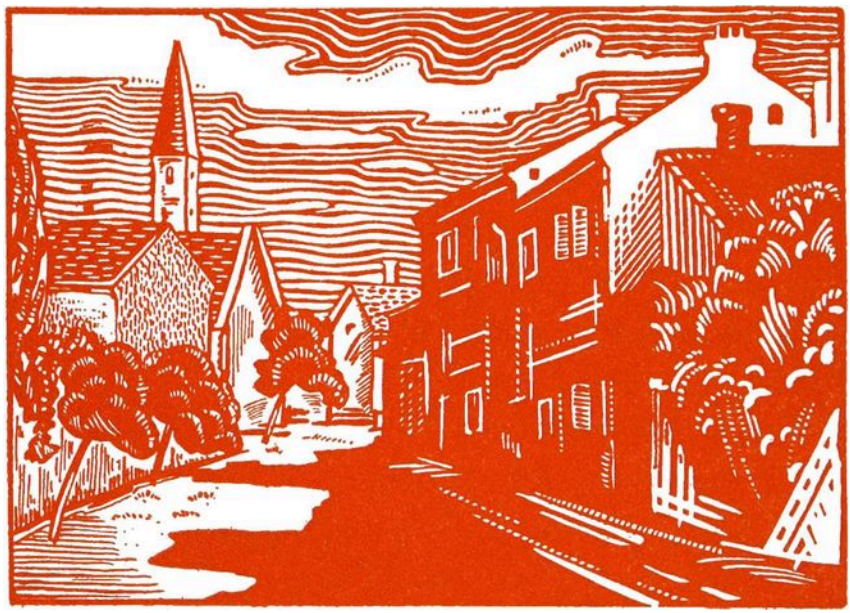
So year was added to year, and the new buried the old, while Martin was slowly initiated into the twofold art of life, to learn and to forget. For as the gambler in order to keep on till the last coin has run through his trembling fingers must forget his losses in the hope of future gains, so humanity, the gambler by compulsion, finds that the greatest art is to forget and that upon this depends everything.

Martin forgot. The Red Turk, who had long since wearied of jumping, was as much forgotten as if he had never been. And Uncle Abraham, who had given him to Martin and who had hanged himself with a stove-cord one rainy day, when he didn't find it worth the trouble to live any more, was soon forgotten as well, though he now and again came up in Martin's dreams as a dark and disturbing riddle. But while the boy was forgetting, he learned. A third of the truth was transmitted by the teachers, and another third was given by his comrades, who soon helped him to lift the veil under which was hidden the Sixth Commandment and everything pertaining to it. They made free use of the Scriptures in their researches. They explained precisely what it was that Absolom did with his father's concubines on the roof of the palace before all the people, and they reveled with Ezekiel over the abysmal sin of Ahala and Ahaliba. But although both of these thirds were given him with an admixture of errors and lies, and although the final third—which was perhaps the most important and which it was his task to search out for himself sometime—had not yet begun to occupy him; yet nevertheless every day widened the chinks experience tore through the spiderweb tissue of legend and dream with which friendly hands had fenced in his childhood, and more and more often through the cracks gaped the great empty void which is called the world.

THE WHITE CAP

—I—

When Martin Birck had got the white cap, his first errand was to go into a cigar booth to buy a cane of cinnamon wood and a package of cigarettes. The young girl who stood in the shop had black eyes and a thick bang. Her exterior corresponded but imperfectly with the ideal of his dreams, which belonged to a more blonde and Gretchen-like sphere; but when she congratulated him pleasantly on his white cap and at the same time regarded him with a look full of kindliness, despite the fact that he had never before been in her shop, he suddenly felt all warm about the heart, caught her dirty hand, which lay outstretched across the counter display of Cameo and Duke of Durham, and tenderly kissed it. However, he repented almost at once. He had no doubt behaved badly. He did not, to be sure, imagine that the young girl was completely innocent—she had no doubt a lover, possibly several; but that was no reason why any one at all had the right to come in from the street and kiss her hand just like that. He was embarrassed and didn't know what to say or do, till he finally plucked up courage to select a cane, light a cigarette, and go out.



Queen Street was still wet after the last shower, little ladies with jogging bustles lifted their skirts to jump over puddles, which mirrored the blue above; stylish gentlemen with thin angular legs and canes like Martin's swung their top-hats in pompous salutation, revealing in the act heads so close-clipped that the scalp shone through. Over the roofs and chimneys of the gray houses the restless white spring clouds hurried in fluttering haste, and far down at the bottom of the street the sunlight quivered between churches and towers.

Martin stopped in front of every store window to see the reflection of his white cap. He could not understand how he had become a student. Up to the last he had believed he would be flunked. His surprise was the more joyous when he received his student certificate the same as the others, and especially when he came to the closing lines, «In consideration whereof the aforesaid M. Birck has been adjudged worthy to receive the certificate: *Graduated with honor*.» These words caused his heart to swell with deep gratitude toward his corps of teachers, for although he considered himself fairly proficient, it was far beyond his expectations to find this idea shared by his instructors. During the last terms he had seldom known his lessons. Often he had not even been able to bring himself to read them over in the ten-minute intermission before classes or to slip a couple of loose leaves from his textbook into his Bible so as to study them during morning prayers, while the lector in theology stood on the platform and talked bosh—a resource which ordinarily even the most frivolous of his comrades would not fail to use. He would, however, have liked to gratify his parents with good marks, although for his own part he had not any great ambition in that direction; but during the last years there had come over him a dull apathy for everything connected with school, against which he could do nothing. It was so hard for him to take it in full earnest. Whenever, contrary to his custom, he had distinguished himself in this or that subject, he was almost ashamed within himself, as if he had done something stupid. As often as he was supposed to dig down into the paltry details in which textbooks delight, he felt himself as ridiculous as the man who, when his house was on fire, saved the poker.

Now that the poker was saved, however, he was so overjoyed that he could have sung; he felt that he was happy and free, as he hastened home with his white cap, home to the blossoming street of his childhood. But the street was no longer the same as before. From a single plot the cherry tree still stretched its branches out over a mossy board fence; everything else was great red brick buildings and small commonplace meeting-houses. The rowdy Franz could no longer disturb what idyllic atmosphere was still left, for he had grown up and become big, and had now been for some time behind the bars of Langholm jail.

—II—

Home was quieter and more empty than before. Maria, Martin's sister, had been married a year ago to a doctor who lived far away in the country, and grandmother was no longer there.

In the evening Martin and his companions were to have a supper at Hasselbacken. Martin's father gave him five crowns to offer to the joy of youth, and his mother took him aside and said: «Martin, Martin, you must promise me to be careful tonight and not be led into any foolishness. Don't make a point of emptying your glass every time any one drinks a toast with you, or you'll lose your head. The best thing would be just to pretend you drank. And I must tell you, Martin, that there is a class of dreadful women who do nothing else but try to lead young men to their destruction. You must beware of them especially. Dear Martin, if I only knew you had given yourself to the Lord and had your thoughts fixed on Him, I shouldn't be anxious about you; but I know you don't do that. Their very breath is poisonous; if you only stand on the street and talk to such a woman, you may catch the most frightful diseases that no doctor in the world can cure.»

«Mother dear,» said Martin, «you're always getting off on that.»

He took up his white cap, said good-by and went.

His mother followed him with troubled eyes, and when he was gone, sat down in a dark corner and wept. For she knew she was going to lose him as mothers always lose their sons.

—III—

Martin thought of his mother as he went along the Avenue on the way to the Park. How could the relations between them have become what they were? To her he was still a little child. When he first began to speak to her of his religious doubts, she pretended to believe that it was something he had got from outside, from bad comrades or some wicked book. Later things reached such a point that he could no longer talk to her about anything but the most ordinary subjects—about shirts and socks and buttons to be sewed on. If their conversation ever took a serious turn, they treated each other mutually as little children. Thus, without his meaning it or noticing it before it was too late, he got a condescending tone that hurt her, so that after such a conversation a thorn remained in the heart of each.

She often lay awake at night weeping and sorrowing over his unbelief. She herself, however, was of the earth in her thoughts, her hopes, and the whole of her being. She believed in hell of course, because she believed in the Bible; but she could never seriously imagine that her son or any one at all whom she knew and associated with would go to such a horrible place. It was not therefore on account of his soul that she grieved most but for his future here on earth, since she had observed that things did not ordinarily go well in the world with those who contemned God and religion. Some of them got into prison, others left their country to go among strangers, and all aroused distrust and ill-will among respectable folk. She feared that her son might come to be one of these, and it was this idea which kept her awake at night and left her with swollen eyes. She had no more precious dream than that he should be «like other folk,» as most people are, if possible better and above all happier, but still on the whole as they were. She could imagine that her son might become a poet, she could even wish it, for she loved poetry; the tears came into her eyes when he read her some of his poems; but she pictured it that he would sit at some office work on weekdays, and only on Sundays or in his free hours write some verses about sunsets, which he would send in to the Swedish Academy and get a prize, so that he would become at the same time a great poet and a respected business man

with an assured income. She believed in full seriousness that he would be more highly thought of among poets if he was in an office and had a title than if he just wrote. That was how it had been with all the real poets. Tegnér was a bishop, and even Bellman had at least had a position in the lottery bureau. As an example that Martin should especially take to follow, she used to mention a poet whom she had known when she was young, who was now an auditor in the Court of Exchequer and wrote verses about everything that was grand and beautiful, about the sea and the sun and the king, and had been decorated with the Order of Vasa. Such a life she considered noble and to be emulated, and when her dreams of her son's future were at their highest, it was something of this sort she imagined.

But Martin dreamed other dreams. He wanted to be a poet. He would write a book; a novel or a lyric sequence, or best of all a drama of ideas in the same verse form as «Brand» or «Peer Gynt.» He would devote his life to searching for the truth and giving to mankind what he found or thought he had found of it. He would also become famous, a great man; he would earn a lot of money, he would buy a little house for his father and a new silk dress for his mother—her old one was worn and faded. He would be envied by men and sought after by women, but of all the women in the world he should not love more than one, and that one a woman who loved another man. This unhappy love should give his thoughts depth and bitterness and his poems wings. But he had a dark feeling that while he sought for truth he should only find truths, and that while he gave them to men in verse more wonderful than any music or in a clear and cold prose with words like sharp teeth, he would despise himself for reaping honor and gold for the morsels he had found by accident while he was seeking for something else. This self-contempt would eat into his soul and make of him an empty husk. But he would not let the world note anything; he would paint his cheeks, pencil his eyebrows and hold up his head, and at the very moment when he himself most deeply despised his poetry and set it below the humblest manual labor, he would inspire men most and be elected to the Swedish Academy to succeed Wirsén. With a countenance immobile as a mask he would give the usual flowery oration on his predecessor. Never again after

that would he set pen to paper. In a strangely colorful and disordered life he would seek to deaden his despair. No sin should be unknown to him; in broad daylight he would drive in an open carriage through the streets with harlots and buffoons, and he would pass the nights in drinking and play. Till one gloomy October night he wearied of his mad and empty life, made a fire in his stove and burned his papers, emptied a glass of dark red wine spiced with a strange herb, and went to sleep to awake no more....

Or perhaps it was unnecessary that his life should end so tragically. When he thought it over more carefully, this seemed to him even a trifle banal. He might just as well move to a small town, to Strengness or Grenna. There he could live alone with a parrot and a black cat. He might also have an aquarium with goldfish. Behind closed shutters he would dream away the day, but when night came he would light candles in all the rooms and pace back and forth, back and forth, meditating on the vanity of life. And when the townfolk passed his house on the way home from their evening toddy at the rathskeller, they would stop to point at his window and say: «There lives Martin Birck. He has taught like a sage and lived like a fool, and he is very unhappy.»

All this and a lot more Martin Birck thought as he went out the Avenue across the park on the way to Hasselbacken.

—IV—

The orchestra struck up the opening bars of «Mefistofele.»

Martin was sitting out by the balcony railing with Henrik Rissler. They listened to the music, looked out across the terraces, and said little. Henrik Rissler had a smooth white forehead and calm limpid eyes. His glance was long and questing; it seemed to slip over the objects nearest it in order more quickly to reach those farther off. He was the only one of Martin's comrades who had sought his company outside of school. They used to go to each other's homes in the

afternoon to talk and smoke cigarettes, and once in a while they had gone on long walks together, often in rain, snow, or wind, out to the park or through the suburbs, talking the while of everything that concerns young men, of girls and God and the immortality of the soul. Or they would go into the gas-lighted streets with the sensation of throwing themselves into the turmoil of the world, would stand in front of etchings in book-shop windows, where they admired beyond everything a lithograph entitled «Don Juan in Hades» with a motto from Baudelaire:

> The hero all the while, half leaning on his sword,
> Gazed at the vessel's wake and deigned not to look up.

This picture excited their imagination, their hearts beat more quickly when in the current of humanity they brushed elbows with a pretty girl, and they believed they were living through an entire adventure every time an old painted professional threw them an ardent glance.

But the original cause of their friendship was that they had both read Jacobsen's novel, *Niels Lyhne*, and loved it more than other books.

Inside the house the others were talking and laughing around the punch-bowls, forming themselves into groups and coteries. Most of them grouped themselves after their old custom according to social and intellectual similarities and differences, which even on the school benches had united some and separated them from others; Gabel and Billfelt, Jansson and Moberg, Planius and Tullman. Others went about somewhat morosely and talked about all keeping together.

Josef Marin rapped on a bowl and called for a toast «to the ontological proof.» It was drunk with rather half-hearted acclaim. Everyone was so tired of school matters that it didn't seem worth the trouble even to make fun of them.

Josef Marin was to be a clergyman, but he was still not quite settled in his faith.

The music played student songs, «Stand Strong!» and «Here's to Happy Student Days!» Dusk began to fall over the tops of the trees, over the roofs and chimneys of the city and the heights of the southern mountains, the pallid dusk of spring twilight, which rarefies and uplifts all things, making them hover with the unreality of a dream world. The crowd, who were clinking glasses and drinking down on the terrace and who a little while ago could still be clearly divided into their component parts as lieutenants and students, guardsmen and girls, and townsfolk with their wives and children, had now melted together in the dusk into an indefinite mass. As though by an inexplicable caprice the murmur suddenly became silent, so that for the moment one could hear the plash of the water in the fountain and the last sleepy bird-notes from the trees. And in the west already flamed a solitary and mighty star.

«Look at Venus,» said Henrik; «how she glitters!»

Martin sat contemplatively drawing on the table, and the strokes under his hand formed themselves into a woman's arms and breast.

«Tell me,» he asked suddenly—he felt that he was blushing—«tell me, do you think it's possible for a man to live chaste till real happiness in love comes to him? That's surely what one would wish. To be with women whom one has no feeling for, who belong to another class, who have dirty linen and use ugly words and only think about being paid—that must be loathsome.»

Henrik Rissler too became a little red.

«It's possible,» he said; «yes, for some it's always possible. People are so different. But I know this much of myself, that it will hardly be possible for me. Then at least the great love mustn't keep me waiting much longer.»

They sat silent and gazed at the star, which glittered ever more brightly in the darkening blue.

«Venus,» Martin murmured, «Venus. She's a great and beautiful star. But I don't see why she should have a name. Anyhow, she doesn't come when she's invoked.»

Martin suddenly heard a strange voice behind his chair.

«Very true,» said the voice, «very true. She doesn't come when she's invoked. An equally mournful and accurate observation!»

Martin turned in surprise. The stranger was a man carelessly dressed, with a student cap, a pale narrow face and black mustaches which hung down over his mouth so that it wasn't easy to see whether he smiled or was serious. His face looked oldish for the white cap, and it was not entirely clean.

One of Martin's companions stood beside him and made the introduction, «Doctor Markel.»

Doctor Markel had come there with an older brother of Billfelt's. They had come from Upsala that day, eaten dinner at Hasselbacken, and then invited themselves to share the student supper. The elder Billfelt was giving a talk inside at the moment. Martin heard something about «Upsala» and «alma mater.»

Doctor Markel sat down beside Henrik and Martin without further ceremony.

«Two young poets, eh?» he asked. «I venture to assume so, since the gentlemen sit here by themselves apart from the vulgar throng and talk about the stars. May I ask what your attitude toward life is? Do you believe in God?»

Henrik Rissler looked at the stranger in surprise, and Martin shook his head.

Doctor Markel looked entirely serious, except that there was a slight mist over his eyes, which were large and mournful.

Some of the others had come up and were now listening to the conversation. Planius and Tullman presented the same docile countenances with which they had listened in class to the exposition of the instructor. Gabel simpered sarcastically with his fine aristocratic face, and behind him Josef Marin pressed up. Josef Marin was short and slight; he looked pale and overworked. The two or three glasses of punch he had drunk had already made him a bit convivial; but now when he heard a serious question proposed and could not see that there was any joke behind it, he broke in with all the earnestness he could summon up at the moment: «I believe in God. But I don't conceive Him as a personal being.»

Doctor Markel seemed pleasantly surprised.

«Oh, you are a pantheist, charming! That's what you must be too»—he turned to Martin—«you who are studying to be a poet. For poets and those who want to seduce girls—and that all poets wish—I cannot sufficiently recommend the pantheistic conception. Nothing can be more suited for turning the head of a young girl than the pantheistic rhapsodizing with which Faust answers Gretchen's simple question, ‹Do you believe in God?› If he had answered as simply and unaffectedly as she asked, ‹No, my child, I don't believe in God,› you may be sure the girl would have crossed herself, run home to her quiet chamber, and turned the key twice in the lock. Instead he answers that he both believes and disbelieves—which gives the impression of deep spiritual conflict—and that God is really a name for the feeling that two lovers have when they lie in the same bed. This he says with much feeling and in beautiful language, so that it does not shock her modesty; on the contrary, she thinks he talks like a priest, and the rest we know—— And for a poet—— But first allow me as an elder student....»

With easy familiarity Doctor Markel drank brotherhood with all who were within range and then continued:

«For a poet, pantheism is a pure godsend, a regular gold-mine. If he is a churchman, he will be given the Order of Charles XIII and a good income, but will only be read by missies and be ridiculed by the liberal papers, which have the largest circulation. If he is an atheist, he will be considered a shallow and superficial fellow, a poor sort, and he will have a hard time to borrow money. No, a poet should believe in God, but in a god who is out of the ordinary run, something not yet existent, never before shown in any circus, that one can never really get hold of, for then the game would be up. The pantheistic god is exactly the raw material needed for such a being. That is the ideal for a god. Each and every one can carve him to his own taste, he is never without humor, he never punishes and of course never rewards either, he takes the whole show easily, which comes from the fact that he lacks a small characteristic that even the simplest of the town rowdies possesses to some extent: namely, personality. That's just the choice thing about him. To a personal god one must stand in a personal relation; that is, one must become a religionist. To be a religionist is

excellent if one has just come out of Langholm jail and needs to be rehabilitated in society. Otherwise it is unnecessary. You see my drift, gentlemen: to stick to a personal god entails a lot of unnecessary trouble, to be without a god entirely is ticklish. Therefore one must have an impersonal god. Such a god sets the imagination going and comes out finely in poetry without in return entailing any obligation. With such a god one will be regarded by cultured circles as a person of noble and enlightened thought and may become pretty nearly anything from an archbishop to the editor of a radical newspaper.

«In formal style this god may be called the Allfather, in common speech the Lord. As a matter of fact he doesn't need any name, it is with him as with that star off there: no matter how one calls him, he won't come.»

The gesture with which Doctor Markel sought and, as it were, beckoned to the star met only a dark and sullen firmament, for great clouds had gathered, the star was gone, it had grown dusky as an autumn evening, and some big raindrops now began to fall on the railing.

Doctor Markel's lecture was not well received. Josef Marin, who had been drinking more punch meanwhile and had become even paler than before, muttered something to the effect that he ought to have a smack on the jaw. The others got up in groups and discussed whether they should go home.

The elder Billfelt took in the situation, rang for the waiter and ordered champagne. He raised his glass and returned thanks in well-rounded periods for the cordiality with which he and his friend, Doctor Markel, representatives of Upsala and alma mater, had been received by the future alumni. He then paid for the champagne and went off with Markel.

«Your brother is a gentleman,» said Gabel to Billfelt.

It rained as if the heavens were opened. They crowded into a street car to go into the city and have coffee. Most of them voted to go to the Hamburg Bourse.

Martin, who had always believed the Hamburg Bourse was a place where the German merchants of Stockholm assembled to do business, found himself to his surprise entering a café that seemed to irradiate a fabulous magnificence. Here and there on the couches sat some of his former teachers and a lot of oldsters who lifted their glasses and nodded genially.

Coffee and liqueurs were brought in. There was talk of future plans. Most of them were to study law and expected to spend the summer in reading up. Enthusiasm rose, and rash promises were made to keep in touch and not forget each other. At one end of the table Gabel and Billfelt swore eternal friendship; at the other Jansson expatiated on his feeling for Moberg. It was only with difficulty that Josef Marin could be restrained from prophesying. When Josef Marin prophesied he would read out long rigmaroles of stuff, marriage announcements from the *Daily News* mixed with bits from Tegnér's *Svea* and Norbeck's *Theology*, all recited in the solemn monotone with which he imagined Elisha had chastised Ahab, and Ezekiel foretold the destruction of Israel and Judah. It was one o'clock, getting on towards two, and various members of the party had already said good night and gone off, especially those who seriously meant to read up for law. The crowd was thinning, the electric light had long ago been turned off, only a couple of gas jets were still burning, and the waiters stood with the air of martyrs as they yearned for sleep and *pourboire*. There was nothing to do but break up.

Outside, the glimmer of dawn had already begun to spread over the streets and squares. It was no longer raining, but the air felt moist and cold and misty, and through the mist the clock-face of Jacobs church shone like a moon in a comic paper.

It was hard to separate, and the company walked some distance down along the car tracks past the opera house. Out of Lagerlunden came a group of poets and journalists, and Martin looked at them reverently, wondering whether it would ever be vouchsafed him to become one of them. The student caps gleamed white in the night, whereupon moths came fluttering from right and left, slipping their arms under those of the young men and tempting them with promises of the greatest happiness in life, until amid convivial mirth and

harmless joking they arrived at Charles XII's Square, for Josef Marin had the fixed idea that he must prophesy before Charles XII. But while he was prophesying, Gabel caught the prettiest girl around the waist and began to waltz with her around the statue, Moberg followed and trod a measure with an elderly bacchante, and Martin stood with a pounding heart staring at a pale little piece of mischief with eyes as black as charcoal and wondered if he dared go up to her. But while he was wondering, Planius put an arm around her waist and scampered off, and Martin stood alone and watched them whirl about in the mist, pair after pair. But the morning breeze from the south now began to clear the mist, driving it across the river like white smoke, and the cross on St. Katarina's cupola burned like the morning star in the first rays of the dawn.

A policeman loomed up from down by the docks and gradually came nearer, one of the girls set up a cry of warning, and the crowd dispersed in all directions. A stout nymph took Martin by the arm and went along with him.

«I must hold your arm, ducky,» she said, «or the cop will pull me in. Besides, you might like to come home with me, eh? I've a right nice place, you'll see. I have a big lovely bed and sheets I embroidered myself. I sit and embroider mornings mostly. One must have some fun for oneself, and I can't stand playing cards with mamma day out and day in like the other girls, and they swear and carry on and act vulgar. I don't care about that sort of thing; I like nice agreeable boys like you. If you're real nice and come to me and come often, I'll embroider you a nightshirt for a keepsake——Oh, you haven't any money! The hell, you say; that's another pair of galoshes! Then you must come again when you have some. Just ask for Hulda. But tell me, is it true there's a girl at Upsala that's called Charles XII?»



«Not that I know,» answered Martin.

«Well, good-by then»....

It was not quite true that Martin had no money; he still had a few crowns left from the honorarium for a poem published in the *Home Friend* and had only made the excuse so as not to hurt Hulda's feelings.

—V—

Martin lay awake a long time, unable to sleep. It was the little pale girl with the black eyes that left him no rest. She had stood there so pale and still and lonely; she had not taken any one's arm or laughed or chattered like the others. She had surely been seduced and deserted; she perhaps had a little child that would freeze or starve to death if she didn't get it food and clothes by selling her body. How he would kiss her if he had her in his arms now, how he would caress her and give her the tenderest names, so as to make her forget who she was, a common street-walker, and who he was, a chance customer like all the rest! With whom was she now? With Planius, maybe. What could Planius be to her? He was no better looking than Martin and he

was as stupid as a codfish. He had been one of the worst grinds and had only had a plain «graduated» on his certificate. Why should she pick out just him? But she, to be sure, had made no choice; she had just taken the first that came along. Martin understood this and found it quite natural. She had given away her heart and soul and had no longer anything to give but her body, so why should she deny that to any one when it was her profession to sell it and when she had already got as deep in the mire as a human being can get? Yet still, if Martin could meet her and she could get to know him, perhaps she might become fond of him and begin a new life. For her he would give up everything—all his dreams of poetic fame and his future; he would choose some profession in which he could immediately earn her and his upkeep; they would be married and live far away from men in a little house by a lake deep in the woods. They would row among the rushes in a little boat and dream away the hours, they would land on an island and be together there all night, while the stars burned above their heads. He would kiss away all sorrow, all dark memories from her brow, and would be as fond of her little child as if it was his own....

But while Martin let his fancy wander thus, he knew quite clearly at the same time that under all these reveries lay nothing but desire—a young man's hunger for a woman's white body. And the further on into the night this lasted, while he lay awake and stared at the gray dawn light trickling in through the blinds, the more bitterly he regretted that he had said no to the other girl, the fat one.

—VI—

When one asks a young man who has just passed his school examinations, «What do you intend to be?» he cannot answer, «A poet.» People would turn away their heads and put their hands over their mouths. He may answer, a lawyer or a painter or a musician, for a man can train himself for all these fields at some public institution, and even in one's apprenticeship one has a modest place in the community, a profession to follow, one already *is* something; a student at the university, or a pupil in the art school or the conservatory. It is not much, but still it is always a sop to throw to

indiscreet questioners, and a conceivable future to point to in the case of these more kindly disposed. But he who is to become a poet is nothing but a mockery before God and man until he is recognized and famous. He must therefore during all his long prentice years hang a false sign over his door and pretend to be busy at something that people consider respectable.

This Martin realized, he found it perfectly natural and not to be altered, and so when his father asked him what he was to be, he answered not that he meant to become a poet but that he should like to work as an extra in a government office. His father was pleased with this answer, perceiving in it a sign that his son would be as sensible and happy as himself. He had feared that Martin might want to go to Upsala and study æsthetics and he felt within himself that he could not have refused, but he trembled at all the outlay and trouble there would be for a poor father of a family to keep a son at the university. He was therefore delighted with the reply and had nothing to remark except that Martin ought to try to enter not one office but as many as possible. That evening he invited his son to go to Blanch's café to hear the music and drink toddy.

But the very next day he put the affair in motion, speaking with his acquaintances in various departments and helping Martin to write applications.

—VII—

Martin had to attend upon the chief of the bureau to which he most desired to submit his services at eight o'clock in the morning in a frock coat and white necktie. Cold and hungry, for he had not had time to eat, he went up the steps of a quiet house in a fashionable street and rang at the door of the general director. An attendant in gold braid announced him and opened the door of a dark private room with curtains only half up. Various articles of dress lay scattered about here and there on the chairs, a great green laticlave hung on the mirror, and at the threshold stood a chamber-pot, which he nearly tripped over but checked himself in time and stood there making an awkward bow. In the middle of the room stood a venerable old man in

a purple-red satin dressing-gown, gesticulating with a razor, his chin covered with lather. Then out of the red satin and the white lather proceeded a voice, which said: «You have a fine student certificate, young gentleman, but don't forget that honesty and diligence are and will continue to be the highest requisites in government service. You are accepted and may report tomorrow to begin your duties, if there is anything to do. Above everything, be honest! Good-by.»

Martin assumed that this discourteous injunction was in accord with ancient custom and refused to be daunted. He went to the office of the department, where he was given a place at a table and a thick ledger to inspect. He added up column after column. If the figures came out right, his duty was to put ticks in the margin; if they did not, he was to make notes of the fact. But they always did come out right. Martin gradually came to the conviction that there were never any mistakes in these accounts, and when this conviction became rooted in him, he gave up adding entirely and merely put in ticks. Sometimes he looked up from his real or pretended work and listened to the buzzing of the flies or the rain plashing on the windowpanes, or to the conversation and grumbling of the older men, or to a blind man playing a flute in the yard.

And he said to himself, «So this is life.»

—VIII—

But for Martin this was not life. For him it was a retreat, an asylum in which he had sought repose for a time, which he hoped to make short.

He read and thought. In books and in his own thoughts he searched for what one so often seeks in youth in order to forget in age that one has ever bothered about it: a faith to live by, a star to steer by, a concord in things, a meaning, and a goal.

Martin had been a Christian up to his sixteenth year. It is natural for a child to believe what his elders say is true. He had believed everything and had not doubted, and on Sundays he had gone to church with his parents. If the preacher was a good talker and a charlatan, he felt edified and moved and wished he could become such a preacher; but if it was an honest unassuming minister who preached as well as he could without making any fuss or gesticulations, he generally went to sleep.

But when he was sixteen he was confirmed. Up to then religion had been a detail of school work set side by side with other details; now it became all of a sudden the one essential, that which daily demanded his time and consideration. The question could not be appeased by the thought: «This is just a matter of the emotions,» since it was customary to weep when one «went forward.» It freely developed the claim to be the highest of all, the dominant force in life, the one thing that mattered. And Martin could not escape the discovery that if religion was the truth, then it was right in this claim, the claim to be above everything else, and he must devote all his powers and his whole soul to it; he must become religious. But if it was not the truth, then he must seek the truth wherever he could find it; he must become a free-thinker. The course between, the Christianity of use and custom such as is professed and believed in by the multitude, was to him mere thoughtlessness and conventionality. This was an evasion which seemed natural to him in most of his comrades, but it never occurred to him to think that this was open to him. He stood at the parting of the ways and had to choose.

But one night when he lay awake pondering over this, unable to sleep, while the moon shone straight into his room and the thoughts crowded into his head, suddenly it stood clear to him that he did not believe. It seemed to him that he had long realized the Christian religion was something that no one could really believe if he wished to be honest with himself. It became evident to him that the problem as to the truth of Christianity was something which he had already gone past and that it was actually a quite different problem which now disturbed him: how was it possible that the others could believe in this when he could not? By «the others» he meant not only his

comrades—for they did not seem to concern themselves any further in such matters, and he knew besides that one could get them to believe in a little of everything—but his parents, his teachers, all the grown-ups, who must know more of life and the world than he did. How was it possible that he, Martin Birck, who wasn't sixteen yet and lay in a little iron bed in the home of his parents, could think differently about the highest and most important things than did old and experienced people, and how could he be right and they wrong? This seemed to him almost as wildly absurd as the faith he had just rejected. Here he was completely at a loss; he couldn't come to any solution. He got up out of bed and went to the window. Snow was glittering white on the roofs, it was dark in the houses, and the street lay empty. The moon stood high in the heavens, but it was a gray-white winter moon, small and frost-bitten and infinitely far away, and in the moon-haze the stars twinkled sleepily and dully. Martin stood tracing with his finger on the pane. «Give me a sign, God!» he whispered. Then he stood long at the window, getting chilly and staring at the moon; he saw it glide in and become hidden behind a black factory chimney and he saw it creep out again on the other side. But he received no sign.

In the depths of his heart he did not wish for a sign either, for he felt that a conviction was something that one could not and should not have as a gift by means of a miracle. To seek for truth and be honest with oneself in the search, that was the one clue he could find.

Martin supposed that confirmation and the first communion were duties prescribed by law which he could not evade. His father had no different conception, or if he had he did not say so, for he reverenced the proverb: Speech is silver, silence is golden. Martin therefore went to communion with the other neophytes. It was a spring day with sun and tender green in the old trees of the churchyard, and when Martin heard the bells roar and sing and the organ begin the processional hymn, his eyes filled with tears and he grieved in his heart that he was not as the others and could not believe and feel as they did. And when he saw the church full of serious folk and heard the voice of the preacher enjoining the young people from the pulpit to hold fast to the faith of their fathers, he felt unrest and confusion through his inmost soul, and again the question came to trouble him: «How is it

possible that all these can believe, and not I? It's mad to think that I alone can be right against all these and against all the dead who sleep in their graves out there, who lived and died in the faith I reject. It's mad, it's mad! I must conquer my reason and teach myself to believe.» But when he came to the actual ceremonies and saw the ministers in their surplices going back and forth before the altar, while they dispensed the bread and wine and carried napkins over their arms like waiters, he felt faint and disgusted and could not understand that he had let himself be fooled into such mummery. And although he knew or believed that these ministers who shuffled about there in the gloom were in everyday life about as honest as most people, they seemed to him at that moment shameless hypocrites.

Belief in a God and in a life after this was what Martin had left at this time of his childhood faith. But his god was no longer a fatherly god who listened to prayers and nodded approval if they were needful and intelligent, or shook his head if they were childish and stupid. His god had become cold as ice and remote as the moon he had stood staring at on the winter's night, and Martin ceased saying his evening prayer, for he did not believe there was anyone who heard it. Then finally came the day when Martin realized that what he had been calling god these last days was something with which no human being could come into any relation either of love or obedience or opposition, something which could only have the name of god by a wanton play of words and a misuse of the incompleteness of language.

And when he examined his belief in immortality, he soon found that he had got far away from the blue heaven of his childhood. He had observed that all who on any ground other than that of revelation preserved their belief in a life after this also assumed a life before this, and he found such an assumption both natural and logical. Only that is eternal which has always existed. What has come into being will sometime cease to be: such was the law for everything existent. But Martin had no memory of any earlier existence, nor had he either read or heard tell of any one who had with any gleam of probability given it out that he remembered any such state. There were, to be sure, people who asserted that they recalled their preëxistence, but they regularly maintained that they had been some historic personage of whom they

had read in books during their present life: *e.g.*, Julius Caesar or Gregory VII. Only rarely could any one remember having been a slave or a waiter or a shop-clerk. This circumstance appeared peculiar. In any event it was clear that the great majority of people, and Martin among them, had not the slightest recollection of any previous existence. He concluded from this that neither in a future life would he be able to remember anything of the present, that indeed he would not be able to verify his own identity; and he found that if one called such an existence immortality, it was again—as in the question of God—a weakness of thought, a play with the imperfection of language, and nothing else. And it struck him as even more bizarre to give such a name to the passage of the dead body into living nature, into plants and animals and air and water. He had no mind for such kinds of word-play.

Things went on in this way so that Martin set out in life without any other belief than that he would grow up, get old and die like a tree in the ground, as his forefathers had done, and that the green earth which he saw with his eyes was his only home in the world and the only space in which it was given him to live and act. And among the many dreams he composed about his life was that in which he was to become like a great and beautiful tree by the wayside with rich foliage, giving coolness and shelter to many. He wished to create happiness and beauty around him and to clear away illusions; he meant to speak and write so that all would have to perceive at once that he was right. To be sure he was not quite certain that truth in itself could produce happiness, but history had taught him that illusion created unhappiness and crime. Like pestilences the various religions had passed over the world, and he was astounded when he thought of all the desolation with which Christianity had marked its way through times and peoples. But he believed in full confidence that its days were reckoned, that he lived at the dawn of a new time, and he wanted to play his part in thought and poetry toward breaking the road for what was to come.

At the time when Martin believed and thought thus it still occurred to him that life, no matter how short and unstable it was, had nevertheless a sort of meaning. He felt himself to be in a state of

development and growth; every day new truths arose before his mind and new beauty before his senses during his long lonely wanderings to the edge of the city or in the woods when spring had begun. And spring.... At that time spring was still a real spring—not a disease, an intoxication, a fever in the blood, in which all old half-forgotten yearning and regret rises to the surface and says: «Look, here I am! Do you recognize me? I have slept long but I am not dead.» Nothing of that sort, but an awakening, a morning, a murmur in the air, and a resounding song. And at that time the thousand unsatisfied desires which he bore within him were like so many shimmering hopes and half-uttered promises, for no long years of emptiness and disappointment had yet managed to sharpen them into cutting knives which wounded and tore at the soul. And if he did not believe that all these obligations, or even most of them, would be redeemed by life, they were still like bribing possibilities, like a lever for dreams without goal or bounds; and even at the moment when the book he held in his hand or the experience he had had in the course of the day whispered warnings in his ear and advised him not to believe in happiness, these dreams were woven into a longing without bitterness and a melancholy as luminous as a spring twilight.

Nevertheless these warnings came ever more closely together, and ever more often it happened that in the midst of the dreams youthful blood conjured up he caught himself listening to the other voice, the voice that welled up from the depths of the oldest times and was echoed in the newest books of the day, the strange voice that none of the hundred new gospels which periodically as equinoctial storms had blown through the minds of men could silence for more than a brief moment, the voice which said: «All is vanity, and there is nothing new under the sun.» Why was he alive, and what was the meaning of it all? He did not cease to ask himself these questions, for he still continuously demanded of the life which he saw with his eyes that there should be something behind it, something which could be called life's meaning. For most of the happiness which he saw men possess and that which he saw them strive for seemed to him like the fairy gold in the story, to be withered leaves, or it appeared to him like nice playthings, something not to be taken seriously. If he turned his gaze

to his own life as he lived it from day to day, he could not escape the thought that in itself it was miserable and empty and that its only worth lay in the uncertain hope that it would not remain as it was. But what he hoped for was not something that one could approach step by step with work and patience and a hundred small sacrifices—competence and respect and that sort of thing—what he hoped for was something indefinite and indescribable: a sunrise, a break-up of the ice, an awakening from a painful and purposeless dream.

For it was like a painful and purposeless dream that his life appeared when he looked at it with waking eyes and found it filled with shabby joy, with vulgar sorrow and ignoble anxiety. Now and then he wrote some poems and stories to earn a little money and to prove how far his words could follow his thoughts, but with every new year all he had written in the old seemed to him childish and worthless, and he felt that nothing would amount to anything which could not fill him completely with the joy of creation. Beyond this he fulfilled almost automatically the sum of actions, or more properly gestures, which usually characterize a young man in a government office or to which other circumstances may lead. He went to his work as late in the day as possible and left as early as propriety allowed. He made acquaintance with his fellow employees and shared in their amusements. He drank punch, ate suppers, and visited cheap girls of the streets; he loved music and often sat at the opera among the blackamoors and musical enthusiasts of the upper gallery, and he sang quartettes and took his reward in double file when an old school superintendent hung the gilded tin funnel on a rose-colored ribbon around his neck with paternal hands.

And he said to himself: «No, I'm dreaming. This is not life.»

—IX—

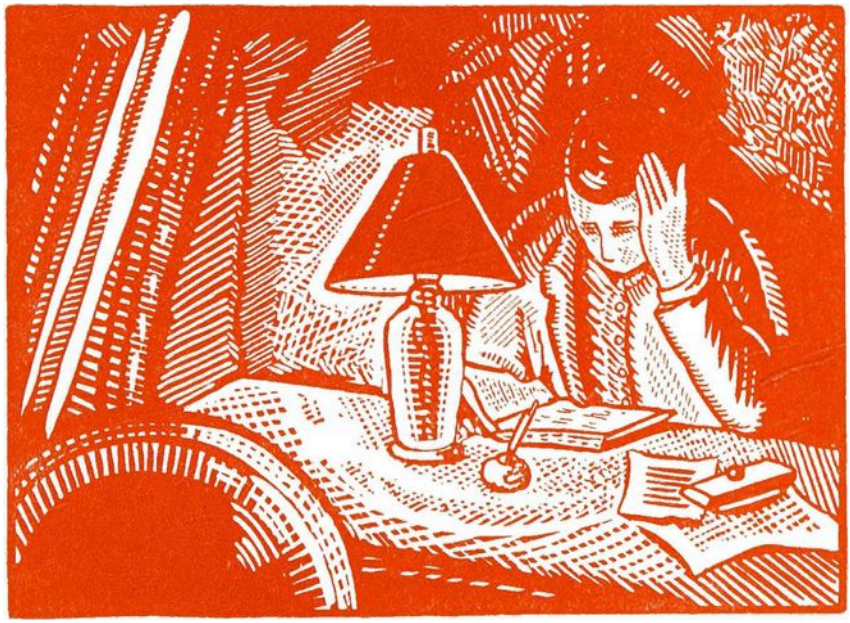
Years passed.

... Martin was roaming about in the twilight. The streets and squares lay white, snow was falling softly and silently. A man went in front of him on a zigzag course lighting a lamp here and a lamp there.

Martin went along without a purpose; he hardly knew where he went.

Suddenly he noticed that he was crying as he walked. He did not clearly know why. He did not ordinarily find it easy to cry. Some snowflakes must have caught in his eyelashes, and his eyes had got wet.... He turned off into a side street and came to a bit of park, he brushed past a couple half snowed in on a bench, and proceeded on among the trees, where it was lonely and empty and the branches drooped heavily under the wet snow.

... Strange! A hovel in an alley, a smoking lamp. Two naked arms which bent and reached forward to the window, and the sound of curtains coming down. The girl, who was humming the latest popular tune while she slowly and unconcernedly hung up her red bodice—he hummed too so as not to speak aloud—was she pretty or ugly? He did not know, he had hardly set eyes on her. It was not she for whom he longed.



He had sat at home in the dusk, the icy blue dusk of a March afternoon, twisting and turning over an old poem that never would get itself finished. Then all at once he had begun to think of a woman. He had met her at noon as he came from his work, and he had felt the

encounter as a sudden intoxication. She was walking in the full sunlight, and many men turned their heads after her as she went. But she seemed to notice or suspect nothing. She was very young—eighteen or possibly twenty. She was neither expensively nor humbly dressed, but she carried her head carelessly and easily, perhaps too a little proudly. Slender and straight, she went on her way, her brown hair shining in the sunlight, and now and then she smiled to herself. He followed her at a distance; she went up to Östermalm and vanished at last in a gateway.

So it was that she had come before his mind again in the twilight, as he sat in his rocking-chair and hunted for rhymes; and she left him no rest—he threw down his pen and went out. There was no longer sunshine; it was snowing. He came to the large gray house where he had seen her go in; he walked to and fro on the pavement directly opposite and saw a window light up here and a window there. Who was she? He remembered he had seen her speak to a man he knew. He went up the steps and read the names on the doors, until at last, deciding that he was childish and stupid, he pulled up his coat collar and went back into the snow. He took by the arm the first girl that gave him a meaningful glance and went home with her.

Now he was standing there in her room. He stood stiffly and silently surveying her as she took off her clothes and chatted and hummed. He hardly asked himself whether she was pretty. He only knew that she might have been prettier without tempting him more and uglier without tempting him less. She showed the marks of her calling. She was still young, and yet one saw that she had long ago tired of choosing and rejecting among her customers. With the same habitual motions of her hand, the coarse hand of a working girl, she hung up her vulgar bodice for any one who asked it of her, for lieutenant or clerk, minister of justice or waiter, making no distinction between them unless possibly that in her heart she preferred the waiter, since he was less haughty than the others and understood her better.

Whence did she come? Perhaps from a back yard with an ash barrel and a privy, perhaps from a village in the woods. The latter seemed likelier; there was still something of the wood girl in her eyes. Glad among other glad children, she had run bare-legged on the slopes and

picked strawberries. Early her contemporaries had taught her to bite of the forbidden fruit. So she had come to the city and had fared as did many others. It was perhaps not a necessity in itself; she might have become a workman's wife if she had wanted, but she had decided that their lot was harder and without much thinking had gone the way that was smoothest to her feet. With a little more intelligence and better luck she might also have become a tradesman's wife, such as goes to the square with her maid and bargains for her boiled beef and horse-radish.

«Well,» she said, «aren't you going to undress?»

He stared at her fixedly, and suddenly had no idea of the whole thing, why he had come and what he wanted of her. He muttered something about not feeling very well, laid several crowns on the dressing-table, and departed. She didn't get angry, only looked surprised and didn't throw any taunt down the stairs after him.

It snowed continuously. Would it never end, this winter? It was now getting on to the end of March, the trees drooped with the snow and it was bitterly cold....

Martin was weary, he sat on a bench under one of the white trees and let the snow deposit itself in drifts on his hat and shoulders.

«What are we doing with life, we mortals?»

The life he led, the pitiful joy he sought and sometimes found, seemed to him at that moment like the fantasy of a madhouse. Nevertheless that life was the normal life. Most of the men he knew lived thus. He was twenty-three. In the four or five years he had been in the game he ought to have got used to it....

No, he didn't understand humanity nor did he understand himself. He often listened to the talk of his friends and acquaintances about these things. He had noted that the most respectable of the young men, and of the old for that matter, believed in two kinds of love, a pure kind and a sensual kind. Young women of the better sort were to be loved with the pure kind, but that meant betrothal and marriage, and that one could seldom afford. As a rule, therefore, it was only girls

of means who could inspire a pure love; outside of that the feeling was more at home in lyric poetry than in reality. The other sort, on the contrary, the sensual, a man might and should possess about once a week. But this side of existence was not considered to have a serious meaning; it was not anything that could render a man happy or unhappy; it was simply comic, the material for funny stories, an equally pleasant and hygienic diversion when one had received his salary and drunk his bottle of punch. But in the intervals the entire sexual life interested but slightly the respectable and decent class of men; they found its functions unbeautiful and disreputable, or, as they otherwise put it, bestial, since they could not exercise them without feeling themselves like beasts.

This was the prevalent opinion throughout the community, and such conditions were explained in that this way of living was the healthiest and wisest, not of course in the sermons of the clergy, the speeches of the politicians, or the leading articles of the newspapers, but in the enlightened judgment between man and man in all circles. It was considered necessary in order that young men might preserve their health and good spirits and that young women of the better classes might preserve their virtue. The young men accordingly drank punch, visited girls of the streets, became fat and florid, and succeeded not only in putting up with this life as with a sort of wretched substitute, but it appealed to them to such a degree that often even after they were married they did not scorn to make excursions to their old haunts, which had become so endeared. The girls of the better class meanwhile were allowed to preserve their virtue and beyond that were not asked for their opinion, but for some of them their precious jewel became at last too heavy to carry....

«What have we done with our life, we mortals?

«Happiness, the joy of youth, whither has it gone? Life is regulated for the old, therefore it is a misfortune to be young. It is regulated for the thoughtless and stupid, for those who take the false for the true or even prefer the false, because it is a disease to think and feel, a childish disease which one must go through before one becomes a man.»...

The apparition of a woman glided slowly past the bench where he sat, and scarcely had it passed when it stood still, turned its head, and fixed upon him two great dark eyes.

He rose, shook off the snow, and went away.

He walked quickly, for he was cold.

He thought about life and books. During his adolescence a new literature had broken forth, which was at war with the prevalent morals of the community and endeavored to change them. Now it had grown silent. Little had been accomplished, almost nothing, and already it was losing its hold. What the new writers had fought for and in behalf of which they had taken and given such hard blows now suddenly belonged to the «'Eighties» and as such had once for all been tried and condemned, weighed in the balance and found too heavy. Instead the blue flower of poetry exhaled its perfume around him as never before. Once again the old words rang like new; earth returned to the golden age, the woods and waters were filled afresh with centaurs and nymphs, knights and damsels roamed into the sunset, and Song herself, with eyes wide awake and bright after her long sleep, stood forth again in the midst of the people and chanted as she had not done in a hundred years. Martin loved this poetry, its rhythms and words stole into the verses he himself sat and tinkered with in the dusk, and yet all this was strangely foreign to him. The world was just the same all the while, everything went its usual way, and no victory was won. Was this the time to sing? It was true that, when he looked more closely, he discovered ideas at the bottom of this new poetry also, and these ideas too were in open warfare against current morality. But only a few readers noted this and hardly any one attached any importance to it. It was just verse.

It was verse, and as a form for ideas poetry was and remained on about the level of the royal opera. There too the baritone might bellow against tyrants without thereby running any risk of missing his Vasa decoration, there too seduction scenes were played by artificial light without any one's taking umbrage; what in ordinary life was called by ordinary citizens bestial was conceived of by the same people with regard to «Faust» and «Romeo and Juliet» as poetic and pretty and

thoroughly suitable for young girls. It was the same with poetry. Ideas, when woven into verse and beautiful words, were no longer contraband; they were not even noticed.

Would a man never come who did not sing, but spoke, and spoke plainly!

He had come out on Strand Avenue. The ice on Nybro Inlet had just been broken, a tug was now forcing its painful way along between the cakes of ice. To the left several newly built millionaire barracks towered up in the snowy mist, in one of which the electric lights and polished glass prisms already gleamed from a long suite of rooms, and in a large hall a white shimmering maze of dancing couples moved behind the muslin curtains.

Several lonely wanderers had paused in a group as if rooted to stare at the paradise above them. Martin also stopped a minute and proceeded with his thoughts. Several measures of the waltz had reached his ears; it was the «Blue Danube»; he walked on humming it and couldn't get it out of his head.

O Eros, Eros! The harlot's room and the festal hall up there.... In both temples the same god was worshiped, and in both temples he was worshiped by the same men. But the women!

He did not dance, and yet he loved balls. He enjoyed standing in a doorway and watching the others whirl by. What atmosphere was there around all their festivals of youth which fascinated him and made him meditative and sick with longing after the impossible? Look at the women! Held close in the arms of the men, with eyes half-shut and mouths open, the most innocent young girls flitted past in dresses which exposed or emphasized their young panting bosoms. What were they thinking of, what were they dreaming of? There were some no doubt who thought of nothing, dreamed of nonsense, and had no other longing than to stir their legs and keep in motion, regular young girls after the hearts of their mothers and aunts. But they were surely not all so. The daughters of men could not have changed so extraordinarily since the not too remote times when youths and

maidens carried phallic images in procession, singing holy songs. What did they talk about, these young girls, when they sat together and whispered in a corner? «She is secretly engaged to him»; «He's in love with her, but she's fond of someone else.» What was in the books they read? The same thing: People who were in love with each other, and how it turned out, and who got whom. To «get,» what did that mean? That one found out on the bridal night.

But the years passed, and the bridal might have to wait. The young girl got to be twenty-five, she was nearly thirty, and still she danced at balls with half-closed eyes, but her mouth was no longer open; she now knew that this looked unseemly, so she held it convulsively shut, a blood-red streak. Would it never come, the great, the wonderful experience? Her glance was that of a drowning woman. «Save me, I'm sinking, I'm going under! Youth is so short. Look! my color is already fading, my bosom is sinking in, and my young flower is withering!» She tried being provocative and bold, she was afraid she had been too timid before, perhaps that was not the right way.... But the gentlemen were already laughing at her covertly when they drank healths over their punch, and some of them mocked her in public. Others understood her better and thought within themselves that she might make a good wife and an ardent mistress. But they had no desire to marry, and to seduce a girl of family would be a risky business. When they left the ball they could easily and without any ado find the way to their old place, to the room with the smoking lamp, or with a red night-lamp hanging from the ceiling.

«What are we doing with our lives, we men, and what are we doing with *theirs*?»

Martin turned back into the city.

On a street corner he met a poet, who was freezing in a thin yellow-green ulster. He was a few years older than Martin and already a bit famous, for he wrote with fabulous ease the loveliest verses on any theme, mostly about girls and flowers and June nights on the lowlands of Scania, whence he had come. He had a pale face and a

thin red beard; and when he met a fellow-artist, his great childlike eyes took on a wild and staring expression, as if he were considering within himself: «Shall I murder him, or shall we go in somewhere and consume alcohol?»

They went up to the «Anglais» and drank green chartreuse.

The poet talked about himself. He confided to Martin that he was a decadent. He worshiped everything that was disintegrating, rotten at the core, and doomed to destruction. He hated the sun and light—here he shook a clenched fist at the gas candelabra on the ceiling—he loved the night and sin and all alcoholic drinks of a green shade. He had most of the well-known venereal diseases and an insane fear of crowded squares. Nothing in the world could make him go diagonally across Gustavus Adolphus Place. This disease gave him a very special pleasure, for he took it as the forerunner of general paralysis. And general paralysis was the great sleep; it was nirvana.

Martin listened absently. «Light is good,» he said to himself, «and darkness is good too. But sometimes darkness is bad, and light too.»

«But how is it,» he asked, «that your poems are really not in any essential way different from those which generally get the prize in the Academy?»

At these words the poet's glance darkened, his lips suddenly became thin and narrow. He took a dirty sheath-knife from his pocket, pulled it halfway out, and laid his index finger on the bare blade.

«How deep can you stand cold steel?» he asked.

«You misunderstand me entirely,» said Martin, laying his hand calmingly on the other's arm. «I love your poems. Only I don't see rightly the connection between them and your inner life as you have just pictured it.»

The poet laughed.

«It's amusing to hear that you love my poems,» he said. «The things I've allowed to be published up to now, you see, are mere skits. Good enough for the mob. Look here!»...

He took a newspaper clipping from his pocket, a review of his last volume signed by a well-known critic. This authority mildly deplored that some of the poems could not be acquitted of a certain tinge of

sensualism which gave an unpleasing effect. In others again the poet struck purer tones, such as were fitted to give rich promise for the future.

«Well, that was quite friendly,» observed Martin, when he had read it.

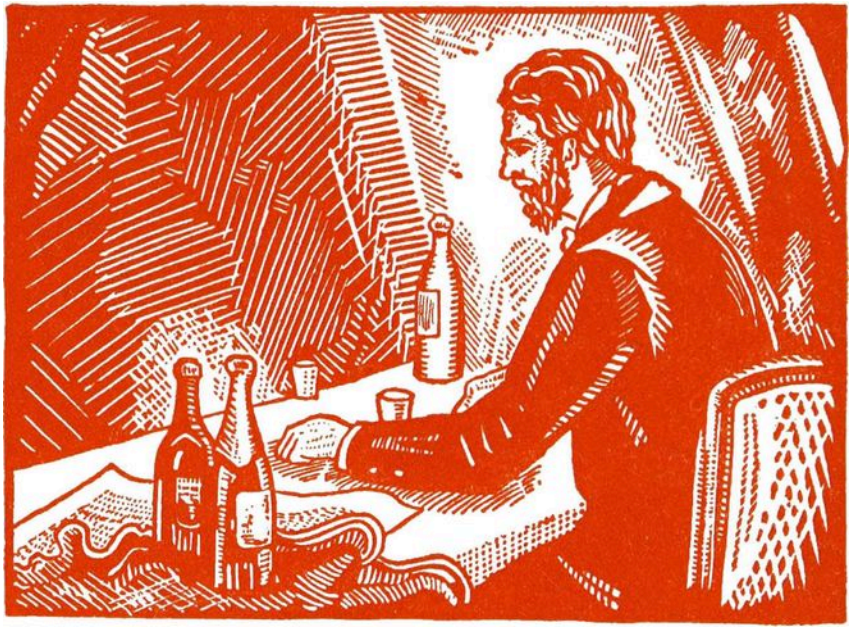
«Friendly!» The poet again made a convulsive grab in his pocket where the knife lay. «Friendly, you say? Shouldn't such an insect creep in the dust before the wretchedest of my poems?»

«Oh, yes,» said Martin, «yes, naturally; but since it isn't the custom for older folks with younger——»

The poet was silent, took a drink, then was silent a long while.

Martin drank too. The strong green liquor burned in his palate and his brain. Thereupon the woman of the morning was there, the one who walked in the sunlight and smiled. Was she asleep now, did she dream, did she smile in her dreams? Or did she twist about sleepless on her bed in longing for a man?

Should he write to her? He could easily find out her name. No. She would only show the letter to her friends, and they would titter and laugh....



The café was nearly empty. In the farthest corner a regular customer sat alone behind a newspaper. In a mirror on the opposite wall was the vision of an old gentleman with white whiskers and a red silk handkerchief sticking out of his breast-pocket. He was fat and red and white, red by nature and white with powder, and as he leaned his chest and arms against the bar, he looked like a sphinx.

The poet emitted a sigh. Martin studied him: the face of a child under the red-bearded mask of a pirate. It occurred to him that he had possibly hurt this man's feelings just now, and he felt the need of saying something agreeable.

«Do you know,» he said, «if you shaved off your beard you would certainly look like the most profligate kind of monk?»

The poet brightened up.

«I dare say you're right,» he said, trying to get a look at himself in a mirror. «What's more, I've written poems with a leaning toward Catholicism. You ought to read my poems sometime, the real ones, the ones that can't be printed.»

«Surely,» said Martin. «Where do you live?»

The poet declared that he didn't live anywhere. He hadn't had any dwelling-place for three weeks, and he didn't need any. He wrote his poems on the table of the café and slept with girls. In the house of one of them he had his green-edged traveling bag with some extra collars and the poems of Verlaine, and there too were his own manuscripts.

Martin began to be really impressed, but he found no outlet for his thoughts, and silence once more spread itself between the two whom chance had driven together on a street corner.

The clock struck twelve, the gas was turned half down, and the poet, feeling the approach of inspiration with the darkness, began to write verses on the table.

Martin said good night.

Sture Square lay white and empty. The snow had ceased, the moon was up, and it was more bitterly cold than ever. To the east a new street without houses opened like a great hole in a wall. To the west a snow-covered jumble of old shanties and stone gables was spread out in the misty moonlight, and from one of the streets of sin which slunk between them echoed a woman's laugh and the sound of a gate being opened and shut.

—X—

It was late when Martin came home, and he was dead tired but could not sleep. Black butterflies fluttered before his eyes, and thoughts and rhythms came to him as he lay and stared into the dark. He raised himself in bed and relighted the candle on his bedside table, where paper and pen were at hand as always. He felt no feverish overexcitement, only a deep weariness, which pained him but did not delude. He saw clearly where his thought wavered and needed the support of a rhythm, a bit of melody; he changed and erased, and finally a poem evolved.

You up yonder
Who are deaf and dumb!
You up yonder,
Who with your right hand squeeze
The fresh and sweetly-smelling fruit of Good
And with your left constrict
The poison-dripping maggot nest of Ill,
Looking upon them
With equal satisfaction!
You up yonder,
Whose glance is dim
With all the emptiness of space—
I have a prayer to you.

One prayer, but one,
Which you can never hear
And cannot fulfill:

Teach me,
Teach me to forget
I ever met your glance.
For look!
In youthful days
I myself made a god
In mine own image,
A warm and living and aggressive god,
And on a spring day I went out
To seek for him through all the world and heavens.
Not him I found,
But you.
Not life's divinity
But death's I found under the mask of life.

Take the memory of the sight of you
Away, O horrible One! That memory is
A hidden sickness, is a worm that gnaws
My life-tree's root.
I know it well, with every barren year
And every day that runs in vain
It gnaws yet closer to my being's nerve.
It gnaws and preys upon
All that in me which is of human worth,
All that which dares, all that which wills and works;
Nor does it spare
The wondrous, brittle time-piece of the soul
Which points out Good and Ill.

Speak, you up yonder,
Is it your will
To re-create me after your own image?
Was that the meaning hidden in your word:
«He who hath seen God, he must die the death»?
O horrible One,
Have you the heart to infect
Me, a poor child of men,

With your immortal vices?

—XI—

The afternoon sun fell across the writing table and gilded everything: the inkstand, the books, and the words he wrote on the paper. The smoke from the chimneys rose straight and tranquilly toward heaven, and in a window just opposite a young Jewess was playing with her child.

Martin was writing to his sister:

Dear Maria:

Thanks for your letter. Mamma is poorly as usual, perhaps a little better these last weeks. Papa keeps the same, only he gets more silent every year. It's very quiet here at home, for as you know I am not one either to love idle talk. Silence is golden. Uncle Janne, Aunt Louise, etc., are still, unfortunately, alive and in health, though it doesn't make much difference anyhow, since we are not likely to be their heirs. But they are always annoying me by asking about the prospects of my work, whether papa isn't in line for the Order of Vasa soon, whether it's true that your husband takes morphine, and so on. Otherwise there is no harm in them.

You ask whether I'm writing much just now. No, very little, but on the other hand I have an appointment for a long job as amanuensis, and last night I dreamed very clearly and distinctly that papa and I got an Order of Vasa together, since the king couldn't manage to give us each one.

Thanks for the invitation to come to you in the summer, but it's not likely I can get off—my appointment will last over the summer. Too bad your husband is nervous. Nice your little boy is well. Remember me to all.

Your brother Martin.

He put the letter in an envelope and laid it aside.

He sat and thought about his sister.

«Is she happy?» he asked himself. And he was forced to answer: «No, she is not happy. She does not perhaps know it herself. Six years ago she was very happy, when she was married and became a doctor's wife and had her own little home in the country to look after—just what she had most dreamed of. She hasn't had any sudden fall from the peak of happiness since then. She has just very quietly slipped down, as usually happens with the years. Her husband is amiable and talented and a clever doctor, but he offends the rich people in his district and has most of his practice among the poor. Therefore he is sometimes hard up. Besides, I am afraid his health is undermined and his disposition is sometimes rather bitter. However, he was in very good humor when he was up here last alone, without her. He amused himself as well as he could, and I fear he was a bit unfaithful.

«A curious bird, happiness....»

During these thoughts Martin had begun again to write. He wrote slowly and half in play, with an intention here and there yet without exactly knowing whither he was tending.

«You do not know me. I met you one day in the sunlight. It is weeks, yes, months since then. You went on the side of the street where the sun shone; you went alone with head lowered and smiled to yourself.

«It was one of those days when the snow was beginning to melt on the street and the pavement shone wet and bright. You stopped at the corner of a street, greeted an old lady and conversed with her. The old lady was very ugly and very stupid, and I imagine too a little cross, as stupid people generally are. But when you looked at her and talked with her, she at once grew less cross and less ugly.

«A little farther up the street a gentleman saluted you, and you bowed and returned his greeting. I felt my heart become bitter with envy, and I followed him with my glance as he went on down the street. But one could not see it in him that he had just spoken to you. One could rather believe he was a lieutenant who had just saluted a major.

«I have met you often since then. You do not know me, and it is not likely that you will ever know who I am. You go in the sunlight, I go for the most part in the shadow. I am dressed like many other men, and I always avoid looking at you so that you see it. No, you cannot find out who I am.

«You have a lamp with a yellow shade. Yesterday you stood long at the window in the yellow glow, after you had lighted the lamp, looking at the stars. You went to the window to pull down the curtains, but you forgot about it a little while. Straight in front of your window was a star which burned more brightly than the rest. I could not see it, for I stood shut in by a little black gate opposite the house where you live; but I know that on spring evenings it stands just so that you must see it from your window. It is Venus.

«You do not know me, and I do not know you otherwise than I do the women who sometimes give me the great joy of visiting me at night in my dreams. It is therefore I speak to you so intimately. But among these women you have for some time been the only one, the others have forsaken me, nor do I feel any longing after them.

«Read this letter and think no more of it; burn it, if you will, or hide it at the bottom of your little secret drawer, if you will. Read it and think no more of it, go out as before in the sunlight and smile in your own happy thoughts. But you are not to show it to your friends and let them giggle and snicker over it. If you do that, for three nights in a row you will not be able to sleep for bad dreams, and a little devil from hell will sit on the edge of your bed and look at you from evening till morning.

«But I know you will not do such a thing—you will not show it to any one. Good night, my beloved, good night!»

Martin sat long with this letter in his hand. «What could it lead to if I sent it?» he asked himself. «To nothing, presumably. It would set her imagination off a bit, her young girl's longing would perhaps have an impulse toward the new and unknown. She might perhaps bring herself to show the letter to her friends, seeing that faith in devils is on the wane; but she wouldn't go so far as to burn it. She might perhaps be amused with it, she might even consider it her duty to feel offended. But in reality it would in the long run cause her joy, and if in

the process of nature she was married and had children and grew old with household cares and every year sunk deeper down in the inconsolable monotony of existence, she would come to remember this letter and wonder who wrote it and if perhaps it was there that the true seed of happiness lay hid. And she would never once recall that it ever made her angry. Nor as a matter of fact does it contain anything that could properly hurt her. It shows her only that she is desired by a man, and as she is twenty and from head to foot an uncommonly beautiful and glorious creation of nature, she must already have noticed that men desire her. And that doesn't at all make her angry, but on the contrary happy and joyous, and that is why she walks in the sunlight and smiles.»

Amid such thoughts he sat a long while weighing the letter in his hand as if it had been a human destiny, till in the end he found his hesitation ridiculous, put the letter in an envelope of thick untransparent paper, and wrote the address in a thin and non-committal girlish style so as not to rouse any curiosity in the young lady's family. Without revealing any special interest on his part he had succeeded in learning her name. She was a Miss Harriet Skottë. Her father had an estate in the country, in the Malar district, and she was now spending the winter in Stockholm with some relatives to study something or other, French or art-tapestry or something of the sort ... in order to get engaged, to put it briefly.

Harriet Skottë. He repeated the name to himself and tried to analyze the impression it evoked. He dwelt in particular on the forename and murmured, «Harriet, Harriet.» But this gave him no impression of her nature; it roused only an indefinite conception of something English and pale and blonde, a sensation of tea fumes and benevolence and chilly bedrooms with varnished floors as at a hospital. The surname, again, only suggested family, an uncle who was on the Board of Trade, and a cousin who was a lieutenant in the Army Service Corps. But if he whispered to himself the whole name, «Harriet Skottë,» there came in a new element which quite excluded the others, then it became something quite different and new, then he felt as if she herself passed through the room with her brown hair glinting in a sunbeam.

He started at the ringing of the hall bell; he heard the maid open the front door and a familiar voice asking if he was at home. He stuffed the letter into his pocket. The next instant the door opened and Henrik Rissler stood in the doorway blinking at the sunlight, whose copper-red rays struck horizontally across the room.

—XII—

Henrik Rissler had come down from Upsala. He had just taken his preliminary degree and in a couple of weeks was to make a tour down in Europe while he wrote his thesis, «On Romantic Irony.» He had no independent means, but his uncle—a bank lawyer, politician, and millionaire—had offered to pay for the trip. This Martin already knew from Henrik's letters. But before he started he was to rest a few weeks. He was somewhat overworked, for he had studied hard so as to get away from Upsala as soon as possible, and he had also taken extra time to write some critical studies for a magazine and so become a little better known among the score or so of men who interested themselves in such things.

Martin had been expecting him for a couple of days and had a bottle of wine and a pack of cigarettes ready.

Henrik shaded his eyes from the sun and said: «Here everything is the same. Here time has stood still.»

«Yes, in this immediate region,» answered Martin. «Only they have built a big factory chimney over opposite. It has been quite a diversion for me in solitude. For a while I worked in competition with the masons, but I was beaten. I began on a poem when they had just begun on the chimney; now the chimney is done, but not the poem. It's beautiful, what's more—the chimney, I mean. Especially in the evening as a silhouette. The smoke no longer belches out, one forgets its purpose; it is no longer a chimney, it is a pillar tower built by some Chaldæan prince and priest, who mounts it when night comes on and measures the course of the stars.»

«Yes,» said Henrik, «one forgets the purpose, then first it becomes beautiful.»

«No,» replied Martin, «it doesn't become beautiful because one forgets its purpose, but because one invents for it another which has the prestige of old and venerable poetic tradition. But outside of that, in and for themselves, without any fancification, factory chimneys are among the most beautiful of modern structures. They promise less than they make good, and at least they are no masquerade figures either in Gothic or Renaissance.»

Henrik smiled. «You're talking in the style of the ‹'Eighties,›» he said.

Henrik Rissler sat in his old place in the sofa corner, Martin sat in the rocking-chair at the writing table. They were drinking wine and talking about Upsala, about books and women, and about a new philosopher by the name of Nietzsche. And as they talked, the sunbeam in which the motes danced like red sparks grew ever narrower and more oblique and more decidedly red.

Martin surveyed Henrik. He found him changed; his face was leaner, stronger, and more masculine in contour. Why had he said, «Here everything is the same, here time has stood still»? He had had an experience, but what? He was in love presumably; he would perhaps go so far as to get engaged—to whom? Was it his cousin Anna Rissler? She was fond of him and he knew it. No, that couldn't be. Was it Maria Randel, or Sigrid Tesch?

«It's curious,» observed Henrik. «Have you felt the same thing?—how painful it is to search for old associations and not to find them. To read over a book one has been fond of, or hear an opera into which one has formerly been able to put everything imaginable and a bit more—and sit empty-handed, wondering where it has all gone to!»

«Yes,» Martin agreed, «it's a strange, oppressive feeling. One feels as if it was one's duty to stick to the past, as if one were committing an infidelity.... And one can do nothing. Why is it really so painful? Is it perhaps because there is no plaintiff in the suit, no clearly formulated

claim to meet? For the plaintiff is not the book or the music which one has lost touch with, not the mood which shrinks away; the plaintiff is one's old self, and that is dead and buried, it is supplanted and refuted by the new, it has no plea to make and yet it does make a sort of plea. Therein lies the paradox, and there is nothing as vexatious as a paradox, when it is not comic.»

Henrik took up the thread.

«Yes, you are right; it is between the old and the new self that the battle is, and as long as there is a new which is the stronger, one can always master the phantoms. There is a continuous growth. The old goes, the new comes—or the old goes, that's really the one certain thing, for how long can one be sure whether the new will come in its place? Suppose the supply should stop some day, suppose nothing under the sun should be new any more, and one only became poorer with every year and every day that passed!»

«Yes,» said Martin, «that sort of thing happens sometimes. And there are cases then in which a man digs up the oldest, the deadest, and most withered thing in his past and begins to worship it anew without seeing the caricature. That's nearly the worst of all. Better the old saying: poor but proud.»

They sat silent a few minutes. The sun had gone, and still it was not twilight yet. It was almost brighter in the room than just before; everything in it had merely become suddenly pale.

Henrik broke the silence.

«Yes,» he said, «it's a melancholy feeling to grow out of oneself and one's old associations—but what's it matter so long as one grows? And what is melancholy, anyhow, if it isn't what the rowdy said of the toothbrush, a new kind of amusement invented by the upper classes? But the melancholy is only there when it's a matter of associations and music and ideas. It was really something else I've been thinking of all the time. I've been thinking of love and women. If one comes into that province, it isn't only just melancholy any longer; no, one can't get off so cheaply. A man is fond of a woman. He wants the whole of eternity to be in that feeling. And yet he can't escape reflecting that this emotion must be subordinate to the same law of growth as everything else in the world, that some day he will weary of what he loves just as

one wearies of the moonlight music in ‹Faust.› I have not had many love affairs, but, believe me, I have never even in my imagination begun the game otherwise than with the thought: may she be the first to tire, and not I!»

«I'm afraid that prayer will not be often uttered,» said Martin. «To be sure both a lover and a married man may be betrayed, but it rarely happens that they wish to be.»

«Still I'm ashamed of the prayer, for I know it comes straight from my heart's great cowardice. How far must we not have come from the primitive simple and straightforward conception of these things to think it is happier to be betrayed than to betray! And yet that's how I feel. What does love signify to me; what does it ever mean to a man? Why should there be anything tragic in the fact that a man is betrayed in love? If he takes it tragically he merely becomes comic. And if on the discovery that he is a cuckold he breaks off reading a good book, he deserves to be one. But women—it's a different thing with them.»

Henrik's glance was fixed on vacancy.

«Deserted women,» he said—«there's something special about them. One can't escape lightly from the thought of them. No, if they scold and fuss and make a row, it's easier at once; then the whole thing becomes burlesque, one shakes it off, and is free. Then one asks oneself, ‹How did I ever come to love such a creature?› One easily persuades oneself that one has never loved her, and so she's out of the story. But the others—it seems the most painful thing of all to me to imagine her whom I love withered and pale, discarded, put in the shadow side of life, while I myself live on.... It is a paradox, I realize—it can never happen; one cannot at the same time act so and feel it so. And yet ... I met an old woman just now, here on the street, right outside your door. She was old and very pale and a little comic. She was quite shabbily dressed, too—one of the poor who are too proud to beg. One often sees such old women; there was nothing remarkable about her, nothing that distinguished her from any others of her kind, except that all at once, when I came close to her, she struck me as so like—— No, I can't tell you straight out. There's a young girl I'm very fond of. I'm so fond of her that we're going to be married, perhaps very soon. It was she that the old woman was like, despite the

difference in age and all the rest—it was one of those indefinite resemblances that one thinks one sees the first moment, and the next it's gone without one's knowing in what it consists. But that moment was enough for me; a chill went through me, a shudder as if I had seen something terrible, and it seemed to me only all the worse that everything else was as usual: the sun was shining and people were on the street.... The girl I care for stood before me, she passed me, withered, discarded, a little comic. It came over me that not even the thought that I myself was dead and lying under the earth could be any consolation to me in such a case; the only conception that could bring any relief was that I was living as wretched and exhausted as she.»

They sat quiet a long while.

«Tell me,» Martin finally asked, «who is she, the girl you are fond of? That is, if it's no secret. Do I know her?»

«Yes,» said Henrik, in a subdued voice, «you know her, and I can tell you. It is Sigrid Tesch.»

Sigrid Tesch. Martin saw before him a young and supple figure, with dark abundant hair and delicate regular features. He had met her a couple of times quite cursorily. He knew she had made an impression on Henrik, and in his own twilight thoughts she had sometimes passed by with a pallid dream smile.

So it was she then, Sigrid Tesch, who was to be Henrik's bride.

«Yes,» said Henrik, «isn't it inexplicable that one can dare go into such a thing as love?... And yet....»

«Yes,» said Martin, «and yet....»

They both smiled.

Henrik Rissler got up.

«It is dusk,» he said; «we can hardly see the glasses. Will you go out with me? It's wonderful outside tonight. Oh, you want to write—— Well, we'll see each other again soon. Good-by!»

—XIII—

It was dusk now, almost dark, and Martin was still sitting in his rocking-chair at the table and could not get up energy to light the lamp. There was a little wine left in the bottle; he poured it into his

glass and drank. He had raised the window to let the smoke drift out, and through the trampling of feet which rose from below like the sound of a hundred ticking clocks he heard the house door open and close again and steps going off down the street—they were Henrik's. Martin thought about his love and what he had said about it, and he was at once struck with the fact that at the mere touch of this bit of reality his own love affair evaporated and was gone like mist and dream. Harriet Skottë.... He asked himself: «If I should read in the paper tomorrow that she was engaged or married, or that she was dead—what would that signify to me? Nothing, no reality lost, no expectation gone to shipwreck—just a mood burst, which would soon have burst anyhow.»

He took from his pocket the letter he had written, tore it open, and read it again. «I'll burn it,» he thought—«but why burn it? I may be able to use it sometime in a story.»

He tossed it into a table drawer among other manuscripts. Then he sank again into reverie.

Suddenly his mother stood in the doorway. She held a lamp in her hand and was leaning forward, looking at him.

«You're sitting in the dark,» she said. «Papa has gone out. May I sit with you here a while?»

Martin nodded. She set the lamp on the table, fetched a basket with her sewing, and sat down to sew.

She sat silent, bent over her work. At length she raised her eyes, large with tears and sleeplessness.



«Tell me, Martin,» she said; «you mustn't be cross, but one day when you were out I couldn't help pulling out a drawer of your table and glancing at your papers. Otherwise I should never know what you're thinking about. And what I got hold of made me so worried that I had to sit down and cry. I didn't understand it, I don't know if it was supposed to be verse or what it was, but I thought it was only full of terrible blasphemies. I got so frightened, I almost thought for a moment that you were out of your head. I know I don't understand anything, but so much I can still see, that you'll never get anywhere with writing that way. You can write very finely, too, if you want to.»

Martin was silent. What should he answer? He divined, or at least supposed, that his mother had really wished to say something quite different, and that her saying he wouldn't get on in the world was merely a forced expedient which she caught at when thoughts and words deserted her. She had of course felt and suspected that the poem she had found in the drawer was meant to be taken quite differently from the way she now feigned to think, she wanted him to explain himself, to talk to her about his thoughts. She was pounding at the door, «Let me in! don't make me stand outside; I'm cold and it's so lonely!» And yet he didn't open the door, he couldn't; he hadn't fastened it, it had locked itself.

What ought he to answer her? Her words had filled him with a deep discouragement. If he had any ambition, it was to write so that each and all who really cared to could understand him. He had no taste for any literary freemasonry; he did not believe in a literature for the *élite*, nor had he failed to observe how often it happened that no one wanted to be of the *élite*. Now it suddenly became clear to him how hopeless was his ideal: there was no art for all, there were no thoughts for all; on the contrary the simplest ideas in the clearest language were but seldom understood by others than those who were familiar beforehand with just that type of thought. How should he be able to speak with her about his thoughts, when her vocabulary, as the monotony of the years had developed it, did not even suffice to express what she herself thought and felt at the bottom of her heart? The god with whom his poem dealt was of course Spinoza's god, the World Soul; but this god was merely an intellectual experiment, whereas hers—his mother's—was at least a product of the imagination and as such had a bit more life and more blood. How should he explain that what she called blasphemies did not apply to her god? She would have answered that there was only one god. He knew all she would answer and say; therefore he remained silent and looked out of the window, listening to the Saturday tread of tired feet on the pavement, and the rain which began to fall against the windowpanes.

And as to what she had said about his future, what could he say? To that there was but one answer: to be successful, to become famous. And that answer he could not give. «If I win recognition some day,» he thought to himself, «a recognition such as would gratify her, it will be when she is no longer alive. So it always is. Why should I hope for an exception for her and me?» What was he to do? Ought he to put his arms around her neck, ought he to stroke her hair and kiss her? No, that wouldn't seem natural. He didn't care for that sort of deception and she didn't either; he knew her; she wouldn't be satisfied with that. She had asked, and it was an answer she awaited. He could answer nothing, and he was silent.

He was silent and felt at the same time how the silence burned in her breast, and though he could say nothing he sought instead with his glance to meet her eyes, those eyes which used to smile so bright

and blue when they looked into his. It still happened sometimes in the midst of dinner or in the evening at the tea-table that she looked at him and nodded and smiled brightly as before, as mothers nod and smile to their little children before they are able to talk. Perhaps she had the feeling that time had gone in a circle, and that this smile was the only form of expression she still had in her power when she wished to communicate with her children. It was just so that he wished she could have looked at him and nodded and smiled, with a smile far beyond all the unimportant things which separated them.

But she did not smile now; she sat silent with hands crossed on her knees, and her eyes, generally so near to weeping, now stared tearless into the shadows as if they sought and asked, «Are all mothers as unhappy as I? As lonely? As deserted by their children?»

The lamp flame fluttered in the night wind. She rose and said good night, took the lamp, and went out.

—XIV—

Martin still sat a long while at the window.

«Here time has stood still,» Henrik Rissler had said. «Yes, he was right. Here it stood still, time. It is by changes that one measures the course of time; I have nothing to measure it with. I shouldn't even know it was Saturday today if I didn't hear the tramping down there.»

An old story came to his mind. There was once a sinner who died one evening in his bed. Next morning he awoke in hell, rubbed his eyes, and called, «What's the time?» But at his side stood the devil laughing and holding up before him a clock that had no hands. Time was over and eternity had set in.

«Eternity; no hurry any more....

«Other people have day and night, workday and holiday, Christmas and Easter. For me it all flows into one. Am I then already living in eternity?»

And he thought on: «Tomorrow is Sunday. What does that mean for me? It means that tomorrow I am free from my ostensible work, and that I thus feel twice as strongly the demand of that which should be my real work. But if the weather is fine, I shall naturally go out for a

walk.... So, anyhow, it won't be a real Sunday no matter what I do. What a strange sort of work I have taken upon me! Wouldn't it be better to give it up while there is still time, to submit to the rules that hold for other men? One is never done with this, there is never a feeling of quiet and rest. Many a free Monday, but never a real Sunday, never any more!

«My ostensible and my real work—how long shall I be able to keep up this illusion? The truth is I'm in a good way to get a permanent job, that in eight or ten years I could become a regular clerk, and in forty years would get my discharge with a pension. My poor mother would be able to spare herself a deal of trouble if she saw all that clearly as I do now. But she imagines in the innocence of her heart that what I write on a few scraps of paper at night will hinder my advancement, for she has no conception of the boundless indifference of men of ideas. To hurt my prospects I should be forced to write personal abuse about my superiors, and why should I do that? They are good-natured men and have got me gratuities and commissions although others deserved them better. They have certainly taken an interest in me. I am not the sort of fellow to put a torpedo under the ark; they have felt that instinctively, and they are presumably right.»

He felt that he would eventually be lost in the multitude. He could not escape the thought that he was at bottom like all the rest; and whether this was his rightful fate, or whether he was too exceptional to be effective among exceptions, he felt only that routine held him every day more tightly a prisoner and that he was going to be lost in the crowd. And the other thing—his poetry; what was that and whither could it lead? Once when he had needed money he had collected a bundle of his poems and gone around to the publishers. A couple of them had wanted to print the volume but none had been willing to pay anything. «No,» he had answered very seriously, «do not count on my ambition!» When he had come home he had looked through these verses again; and again, as so many times before, he had found them uninspired and empty. Most of them were written so as to be sold at once to a magazine and showed that they were so written. And he said to himself, «How absurd it is for a man to make a business of ideas when he has no sure means of subsistence! As clever

as the way the minister at a funeral sermon transforms the dead man's means of livelihood into a mission in life. But existence knows how briskly and mercilessly to transform a mission in life into a means of livelihood for a man with no income. Yet supposing this should be a real means of livelihood—but no, it won't be; distaste and weariness will come, one will tire of the whole thing and sink back, down into the crowd.

«Down into the crowd; one will do as the others do, there will at least be no more need of conjuring tricks, one will get back his sense of time, one will have Sundays and weekdays, work and rest, real rest....»

The night air streamed in cold through the window, he shivered but couldn't make himself raise his arms and shut the sash. The rain fell steadily, and, as often happened when he was very tired, his thoughts began to go into meter and rhyme:

I sit alone in the darkness
And hear the falling rain,
I hear the drops come plashing
Against the windowpane.

A grief on my heart lies heavy,
My labored breath comes fast.
Drop after drop my youthtime
Is trickling, trickling past.

THE WINTER NIGHT

—I—

Over Martin's table in the office an electric light with a green shade swung, like a pendulum, gently to and fro on its silken cord. It had been set in motion just a moment ago when he had lighted it. He stretched out his hand to stop it, but instead waited the time when the swinging should subside and die down until it was imperceptible. Lamps were likewise screwed up over the other tables, six shining green triangles swung to and fro in the semi-darkness of the room, and lean writers' hands fumbled at the windows after the curtain cords to pull them down and shut out the snow and the winter dusk. Martin loved these green lamps, which gave out no heat or bad odor, and whose glow had the pure and cold sheen of jewels; and he longed for the day when electric light should be cheap enough to make its way down even into the homes of the poor. And just here in this big low old room with whitewashed walls, because the house was old and had a groined gateway and low small-paned windows in the entrance hall where his office was, these green lamps seemed to him to fit in even better; he saw in this a symbol of continuous development, an unbroken chain of hands and wills, from those which had wearied long since to those which were now in embryo, the new inwoven with the old. Where all is old there enters an atmosphere of wretchedness and decay, and where all is new only that can thrive and feel at home which is itself new from top to toe, from pocketbook to soul.

And Martin was not new, his clothes were not new, nor were his thoughts. He thought and knew nothing great other than that which others had taught him—various old gentlemen in England and France who were now for the most part dead. If these thoughts still brought him any joy, it was mainly because the times had seemingly forgotten them long ago, as if they had been written in running water. Other winds were blowing now, winds before which he preferred to draw up his collar over his ears; everything came back and all the corpses peeped out, but he did not care to see them.

The lamp had ceased to swing over his desk, and he returned to his accounting. He no longer contented himself with putting down ticks; he carefully scanned every item and added up every column. His first youthful antipathy to a mechanical task was long since conquered, and he had gradually come to learn that these figures were not, as he had first believed, entirely free from the imperfections which are inherent in everything human. On the contrary they were often encumbered with inaccuracies and mistakes; and when he now and again discovered such mistakes, he was glad at heart but felt at the same time a faint sensation of sorrow. He was glad because he had occasion to show his great zeal and because he could count upon his rightful percentage of the sum which his alertness had saved the state treasury; and he felt the dark memory of ancient sorrow when he recalled that he had desired a quite different sort of joy from life. Sometimes, too, he thought of the poor officials down at Landskrona, Ohus, or Haparanda, who had made the wrong calculations, perhaps under the influence of last night's toddy, and who would now have to pay the difference. But this thought left him cold, for the years had taught him he must set limits to his sympathies.

It was warm in the room, the remains of a great birchwood fire glowed in the porcelain stove, for there was no inducement to spare the government's wood in these times when one had to skimp one's fuel at home. Von Heringslake, the chief clerk, who had an income of forty-six hundred crowns and performed his duties with the pleasant ease which comes with an independence, sat squatted in front of the stove and roasted apples over the embers. On his bald pate—which his mortal enemy, Auditor Camin, asserted was the result of early dissipations but which in reality shone with the innocence of early childhood—glinted the triangular reflection of a green lamp. The fragrance of roasted apples spread and stung Martin's nostrils, and he was bitterly annoyed that he had not in all ways the same views concerning this and the future life as Heringslake, for then he would surely have been offered an apple. From Auditor Camin's place sounded for the hundredth time the old pronouncement, «The country will never be right till we make the farmers pay for shooting licenses.» And down at the bottom table off by the door, where it was

draughty and there was a wet odor of umbrellas and overcoats, the youngest generation was eagerly at work putting in ticks and trying at the same time to recount in whispers the orgies of last night and the number of punch bottles emptied.

Martin was still young, for in government service one ages slowly, but he was no longer one of the youngest and did not have to sit in the draught of the door. He had drunk brotherhood with most of his immediate superiors and in his turn did not neglect the duty of laying aside formalities with those who were younger than he. These ceremonies were wont to be performed at a general banquet in December. This was to occur in a few days, and the list of subscriptions was now being circulated in the department, but Martin did not sign it. He had other uses for his money, and there was only one of the newcomers with whom he would have cared to drink brotherhood, a young man who had a place just opposite him at the same table and in whom there was something familiar and appealing to his sympathy: namely, an absent and dreamy glance and the mechanical gesture with which he set down the ticks. Martin often used to talk to him about the way of the world and was pleased when he sometimes received intelligent answers.

As he handed over the subscription list without writing on it himself, the other looked up and asked in a tone which seemed to convey a touch of disappointment, «Aren't you coming to the banquet?»

«No,» answered Martin, «I have another engagement. But we who are above conventional forms can assume that we have drunk brotherhood just the same.»

The other blushed a little, and they shook hands across the table.

«Tell me,» the younger man asked after a while, «why does Auditor Camin want to charge the farmers for shooting licenses?»

«I don't really believe he wants that,» Martin replied. «He knows that shooting licenses for the farmers would raise the price of necessities even more than taxes. He is only repeating an old saw that he heard in his youth when he was an assistant. It has stuck to him because it expresses a collective antipathy, a class hatred; and commonplace men always need to hate and love collectively. Look out

for that, it is one of the surest signs of an inferior point of view. He likes women, officials, leading actors, and West Gothlanders, because he is a West Gothlander himself; and he hates farmers, Jews, Northlanders, and journalists. It is true that the farmers are a bit stingy in recognizing the services which he and the rest of us perform for our country, and that is why he hates them. But in that they observe the same principle as all employers of labor: to pay as little as competition will allow. If there was a shortage in clerks, they would pay more.»

Von Heringslake, who had by now eaten his roasted apples and resumed his place at the table next to Martin, turned on his chair and surveyed him mournfully.

«You have no heart,» he said.

It was after three o'clock; here and there the men were gathering up their papers and going off. Martin got up, took his coat and hat, put out his green lamp, and departed. He had crape on his hat, for his mother was dead.

—II—

He turned into Long Western Street. On snowy days such as this he nearly always took that street, because in the narrow winding rift between the tall old houses one was as if half indoors, in the lee of the worst wind gusts.

«Winter, cold.... Strange there are people who assert that they like this weather. Heringslake, who has a heart in his breast and loves his native land, regards cold as preferable to heat. But when it's cold, he always puts on furs. The conception of hell as a very warm place clearly originated in the torrid zone. If a northerner had invented it, it would have been contrariwise a fearful place for draughts, the breeding ground of influenza and chronic snuffles. But such as the climate is, I have got used to it, and it has possibly done me excellent service of which I myself am not aware. Provisions are laid on ice in

order to keep; everything is preserved longer in cold. Why not human beings as well? I once longed to be consumed in the flame of a great passion. It never came, whether because I was not deserving of so great an honor, or whatever the reason may have been. But now, afterwards, I have begun to misdoubt that such a conflagration may rather be a bonfire to amuse the spectators than any real enjoyment for the chief actor. Fire is, in any case, distinctly not my element. If a real spring sun were ever to come into my life, I should go rotten at once from being unused to the climate.»

He stopped a moment in front of a jeweler's window. Most of the pieces were distinguished by a commonplaceness which left him no regret that he could not purchase any. Once, indeed, it was just a year ago to the day, he had bought a little ring with a green emerald. She to whom it had been given still wore it and never wanted to wear any other ring. She said she shouldn't ever want to wear a plain gold ring. Well, in any case he couldn't offer her such a specimen....

«I'm ungrateful,» he said to himself, «now that at last a little sunlight has come into my life, more maybe than comes into most. But I have been frozen too long; I haven't been able to thaw out yet.»

He had come out on Mint Square, the northerly gale blew his eyes shut with the snow, and he felt his way along, half blind, toward North Bridge. He had to stop again to get breath at Looström's bookstore, where the celebrities of the day were exhibited in the window: Crispi, King Milan, and Taine, while between an Excellency and a forger he discovered a face that looked familiar. It was a Swedish poet, the decadent who had expounded his ideas of life at the «Anglais» over the green chartreuse. He was not there because he was a great man but because he was dead.

Martin went on toward home.

«At last a man who has reached his goal! His goal was a bit unusual, and he did not reach it quite as he imagined; he never got the general paralysis of his dream, for he died simply and modestly of consumption. But I don't suppose he was so particular as to details; as a matter of fact he only wanted to succumb, no matter how. Perhaps he was right; that's the sort of goal one ought to set for oneself if he hopes to reach it in his lifetime. It is true one might also propose to

oneself to be a millionaire or a bishop or a member of the legislature, and that goal too one can usually reach if he really wants to. Those who know how to concentrate their will with sufficient intensity on a single object are so extremely few that the competition is by no means prohibitive. Everybody wants to be rich, but most men wish at the same time to live as if they were rich already; they want to take things easy, to have a nap after dinner, drink champagne with the girlies and so on, and so they never get rich, never even become bishops or members of the legislature. He who wants to stop on the road every now and then and enjoy life a bit before he reaches his objective will never reach it; and the others, the indefatigable pilgrims, the men of will who arrive—what have they left afterwards when they get there?

«On the other hand it is possibly superfluous to expend any particular effort on the objective: to succumb. That is a goal which can certainly be attained at a cheaper price; it even comes near of itself, slowly and surely. The best thing is perhaps that which the other dead man over there in the bookshop window loved so much while he lived: a big tree and tranquil thoughts. For it is not quite true, what Messer Guido Cavalcanti said when he felt death approaching, that it is as vain to think as to act. In one way it is no doubt true: namely, that the final result will always be the same black pit, and as a meditation on death Messer Guido's words have their value. But looked at from another point of view, it is clear that he who enjoys thinking is always in this world of incalculables in a slightly better position than a man of action. Because for him the minute has its worth in and for itself, independent of the uncertainties of the future. He who wishes to become a Knight of the Order of the Seraphim or a pope and gives up everything, the pleasures both of thought and of love, to attain that object—and the first sacrifice at least is inevitable—and then gets a fishbone in his throat and dies before he has reached it, his life is a nullity, an intention without performance. But he whose standard lies in thought may have his life cut off at any point and it will be like the snake of popular superstition, it will still live, it will have its value even as a fragment; nay, it has never, properly speaking, assumed that it wished to be anything but a fragment. For he who is measured by

the standard of thought can never set himself any human goal, or if he does, this will be arbitrary and inessential, and it is a matter of no significance whether he reaches it or not.»

Martin had got up to Östermalm and was almost home; he was hungry and was eager for his dinner, yet he stopped at a street corner and looked up toward a window high up in a fourth story.

Yes, there was a light there; she was home then. He knew that already, anyhow, and he knew besides that she expected him after dinner. In the evening they were to go to a theater together; they were to sit in a stage box behind a screen where nobody could see them.

He had taken a mistress. Chance had brought them together. She worked in a life insurance office in the morning counting money. She worked for her living. She had, to be sure, an old father somewhere off in the country, a pensioned forester who wrote her letters three times a year; but she was self-supporting and depended upon no one. Like other young girls she had dreamed of a happiness which should be correct, and had guarded her jewel in the hope of being married. She had had her fancies and been in love with men who had not even noticed it. But these small flames had gone out when they had no fuel, and if a man not too ridiculous or repulsive had wished to offer her his hand, she could easily have persuaded herself that she loved him. But she had seen the years run away; she had danced in the winter and bicycled in the summer, and many men had let her divine by their looks and veiled words that they would gladly possess her; but no one had wanted to marry her, for she had no dowry and did not belong to a family with influence. The more economical and diffident of the men, moreover, were frightened by her elegance, for she had a sure and delicate taste and two industrious hands, and many a night she sat up by her lamp and sewed cheap remnants and old shreds into dresses, which later gave to inexperienced eyes the impression of having cost a great deal, or to the more skeptical-minded even suggested a doubt of her virtue. She was not, however, beautiful enough for the men whose feelings were governed by their vanity, nor

did her nature have anything of the sweet and docile quality fitted to attract men who wished to be lords in their own home, men who had simply tired of bachelor life and therefore looked about for a nice and charming and modest and obedient wife.

Both her own character and her outer circumstances were such that she had no great prospect of being loved for any other reason than love, and she had gradually begun to suspect that this feeling, of which so much was said and written, was really scorned and put to one side so that it was extremely rare. She had thought over all this, she had felt the minutes running through her fingers like sand, and had decided that the years to come would be still more wretched and worthless than those before and that the jewel she guarded was losing its value every day. Most of all she had been frightened at how quickly women age who live without men, except those who are so fortunate as not to feel any strong desire or lack. But she was not of these; no, she was a real woman and she knew she was. The desire which in her first youth had only been a sweet and indefinite longing, a dream of happiness of a strange and unknown sort, now burned in her veins like poison; and her first timid girlish fancy, which had hardly dared to look beyond a kiss in the twilight between bushes of roses, had developed with years into a hobgoblin much worse than those used in children's picture-books to frighten naughty boys. Her glance became wistful and yearning, and she tried to bring herself to a decision.

She had almost given up hope of a husband; it was a lover she was seeking, and even him she sought for long in vain. It was not that there was a lack of men who would take her out to dance; there were on the contrary many, and she could make a choice. She looked around in her circle; she flirted right and left. She grew less afraid about her reputation than before and went to secret rendezvous with men who had been attentive to her some evening at a ball. But they remained strange to her, and every time an understanding was in the air, she was overcome with shame and became suddenly icy with fear and repugnance. For every time when the critical moment came, she read in the man's eyes the ineradicable crudity of his heart. She read it as plainly as if it had stood written on white paper that what was for her a wholly new experience in life—perhaps ruin, perhaps salvation—

was for him an amorous adventure. She read that what she was about to do was in his eyes merely a *faux pas*, which he could overlook only in so far as it gave him pleasure; and she read that not only did he intend to give her up very soon, but that he also meant to salve his conduct beforehand by showing her his contempt. She saw all this and tired of the game before it had begun, asking herself if she might not just as well follow the path of virtue, which in any case was clearly the most convenient, and wither into old age without will and without hope.

But when she met Martin all this became different, and when she gave herself to him she felt no more fear, because she saw that he had understood her, that his thoughts were not like those of the others, and she felt that he loved her. With him she felt no shame, nor did she feign any, for she had already sinned so much in her thoughts that the reality seemed to her innocent and pure. She was no longer young; she was getting on toward thirty, just as he was. Her complexion had already been marked by the early frost, and vanished illusions had made her bitter at heart and crude of speech. But the bitter heart beat warm and fast when it rested on his, and the ugly words did not make her mouth less sweet to kiss.

—III—

Martin sat alone with his father at the dinner table within the same circle of yellow light which had enclosed the sleepy winter evenings of his childhood. Martin Birck and his father had seldom anything to say to each other. They thought differently about everything except the taxes on food-stuffs. This lack of agreement did not, however, cause them any sorrow; they attached no importance to it. They both knew that different generations think differently, and they found this natural. Nor did they find silence anything painful or oppressive; it was just the self-evident expression of the fact that nothing had happened which could give rise to an exchange of opinions. When they chatted together it was mostly about the improvement of government work and about new houses. For Martin's father was interested in his city. On Sundays he often went for long walks to

distant parts of the city and saw how new suburbs shot up out of the earth. He thought of how Stockholm had developed since his youth, and he found all the new houses handsome, especially if they were large and imposing with many windows and small towers at the corners. And when Martin heard his father speak of all these ugly houses and call them handsome, he thought of how unjust life was, since it remorselessly closed the way to the inner regions of beauty for the best and most useful members of the community. For the way thither went through melancholy, there was no other, and it was not idly that the Greek musician answered Alexander, «May the gods never make you so unhappy, my lord, that you may learn to understand music better than I.» Martin's father had had a youth too full of worry and a manhood too full of strenuous responsibility to know anything of the mental depression with which life punishes those who think more about beautiful and ugly and good and evil than they do about their daily bread.

On this day, as usual, Martin's father discoursed about one thing and another over his coffee and cigar. He spoke of a men's dinner he had attended the day before, where he had felt embarrassed on account of his Vasa decoration; for he had gone with the large official medal, which was the only one he had, whereas the other men had had the small miniatures.

«So,» he finished, «I looked like the biggest fool of the company.»

«Yes,» observed Martin, «appearances were clearly against you. But in reality the miniature medals of the others gave the clearest proof that their foolishness was greater, since because of their decoration they went to more expense than was strictly necessary.»

«Yes,» his father answered, «I thought of that too, but I felt awkward, anyhow.»

The conversation died down. Martin was thinking of various stories about decorations which he had heard, such as that about a man who had been given the Vasa medal because he had sent flowers to the royal hospital on the days when the queen was to visit it, and about

one who got the North Star because he had bought a house. But it never occurred to him to tell these, because when he thought the matter over he could see that these stories, which he found so amusing, might not have quite the same effect on the elder man, who had earned his decoration by forty years of ill-paid work in the government service and could therefore hardly fail to think of it without some respect, although in conversation he might make fun of it.

Silence spread out around them; the father smoked his cigar and looked out into the dark, and Martin sat in thought. He thought of the history of his home, how it, like other homes, had come into existence, grown and blossomed, and how afterwards the bonds had one after another been broken: his sister married, his mother dead. The best time, the blossom time, was mostly that when the children had just grown up and the elders were not really old. It was true he had heard old women say that the happiest time was when the children were small. Yes, that might well be—for the mothers. But he remembered the years when his sister had just grown up and was about to be married. Then everything was glad in the home; they had youth, friends, music. The piano, which now was dumb, still held the waltzes and opera selections of the bygone years; and often when he lay awake at night, he could still hear the Norwegian songs they sang then: «He Leaned above the Garden Bench» and «I Ask Thee Not for Roses from thy Breast.» In these songs still lived a part of his youth, and they now seemed full of all the strange melancholy of the past. Then suddenly the house had became silent, more silent with every year, till one day the father sat alone with the son in an empty and shattered home.

Looking at his father, he asked himself, «What can I be to him?» «Infinitely little,» he had to answer, «almost nothing.» She whom he had loved from his youth up now lay under the earth, under a little snow-covered gray stone, and could not warm his age. The fire on the hearth was ready to die out. *He* was the one whose duty it was to kindle the new flame. He felt it was this which, in the normal course of things, the elders of the family had the right to expect of the young: to see the chain carried on, a new home, and grandchildren to rock on their knees. It was so that nature had arranged, she tried everywhere

to hide the dead with new young life, as we ourselves cover corpses under flowers. Dissolution was thus more easily approached; the way went downward, to be sure, but one took it amid play and prattle, as when one started the journey. But to that great and simple craving he could answer nothing. It was true he could do several things: he did not think there was any sort of beauty in the world that was foreign to him, or any thought or shade of a thought that he could not follow, and furthermore he could look over government ledgers and inscribe signs in the margins, and drink a good deal of whisky without losing control of his mind, and perhaps a few other small matters. But he could not build a home. Not a chance, not a possibility of it. An artisan, a day laborer could do it, but not he. He could not conjure forth the four thousand crowns a year that a poor family of the middle class needed to live. If he could ever get to that point, as he well might with years, he would be old, his father dead, and she whom he loved—what would have become of her?

But it was true, he realized, that the old man did not, at least not consciously, make any such demand on him. On the contrary his father understood clearly how impossible it was. He had no hope of seeing a continuation of his line, of being able to grow old in an environment of futurity and promise and new scions. But Martin realized that just this, the fact that he could have no such hope, weighed upon him like a dark sorrow and made his twilight even more gray and empty. He had had grief enough without that. He had received small pleasure from his daughter's marriage. Her little boy was dead, and she had lately written home that she wanted a divorce from her husband.

«The fire is dying on the hearth. Who is to kindle the new flame?»

His father went into his room for his after-dinner nap.

It was five, and Martin dressed to go to her who was waiting for him. He put on an evening suit despite the fact that they were to be alone and unseen. He had promised her that, for it was their bridal anniversary.

—IV—

She stood at her dressing table, where two narrow candles burned before the mirror. She had just arranged her rich brown hair, and before she finished her toilet she touched her face with a powder puff to subdue the color. He sat behind her in a corner of the sofa, but their glances met in the mirror and were fixed on each other in a long smile. The trembling of the candle flames and the distance, which the mirror lengthened, made this smile dark and mysterious. And far within the dusky depth behind the glass danced a green spark from the emerald on her finger.

«Shall you be ready soon?» he asked. «It's half-past seven. I'm afraid we shall miss the ghost.»



It was Hamlet they were to see.

She turned and stroked his cheek with the powder puff, so that he became as white as a Pierrot.

«Silly Pierrette,» he said, wiping off the powder with her handkerchief, «don't you see I'm pale enough as it is?»

She leaned down, pressed his head to her breast, and kissed his hair.

«I am so happy,» she whispered, «because it is my bridal day today, and because I am going to the theater with you to sit in a little nook where no one can see us.»

He caressed her hand softly. He felt a secret stab in the heart when he heard her speak so, for he knew almost to a certainty that if there had been any chance of it she would much rather have sat with him in a place where all could see them. But he did not believe that she had been thinking of this just now. Never during the past year had she let fall an allusion to marriage, and she knew only too well how impossible it was. But he on his part could never cease to feel it as a secret disgrace that it was not in his power to give her the happiness which belonged to a secure and respected social position where she would not need to conceal anything from the world. He felt thus not because there remained in a corner of his soul any idea of a duty to be performed or of any transgression that ought to be atoned for, but because he was infinitely fond of her and could have wished to make life bright for her eyes and smooth for her little foot, which had such stony paths to go that it was not surprising if at last it had trodden a bit awry.

He dismissed these thoughts, however; he did not mean to attempt the impossible; he was no strong man who could take her in his arms and break a way for them both. And she had made her own choice. She had known strong men too, the kind of men of whom women commonly say, «He's a real man»; if she had wished she might have given her love to one of them, and he would not have despised it. But her deepest instinct had held her back with forebodings of shame and unhappiness. For, strangely enough, it was precisely the strong men who rarely acted as he could have wished to do had he been able; they were strong just because in the crisis, when there was really something at stake, their feelings always formed an alliance with their profit, and they usually knew where best to employ their strength. No, he and she had nothing else to do, lonely and chilled as they were, than gratefully and without any yearning for the impossible to warm themselves at the happiness which had fallen into their hands, blessing the day when they were driven together by the voice of their blood, which told them that they suited each other and could bring

each other joy. Secretly, however, he often liked to dwell on the remote vision that some day many years hence he might be able to give her a home. The thought that by then she would be already an old woman did not frighten him. He had the feeling that, no matter how fast time flew, even if she had gray hair and wrinkles around her eyes, her young white body could never become old—it would still remain young and warm as now; and no matter how the years passed and winter after winter snowed under his youth and stung his soul and his thoughts with needles of ice, his heart would always be warm as now to the beating of hers, and that always when the two met there would spring up a spark of the sacred fire which warms all the world.

While he was thinking all this, his eyes were following every motion of her slender white arms before the mirror. Again his smile sought hers, she nodded to him with a glimmer of secret happiness in her color underneath the powder, and deep within the dusk he saw his own face, the features sharpened to a mask-like quality by the candlelight, nodding in answer like a Chinese doll.

«There's no hurry,» she said. «In any case we can't creep into our little corner before a good bit of the first act is over; otherwise we might meet acquaintances in the lobby.»

«That's true, you are right,» he answered.

He had thought of that himself too.

«One must have one's wits about one in such a position as ours,» she nodded. «It's a different thing from sitting with one's nose down over a book. But isn't it almost like magic, when one thinks about it, that we've actually been left in peace a whole year and that nobody knows anything? I even think people speak less badly about me now than they used to. Everybody has got so friendly toward me: the manager, the clerks, and the girls in the office. But perhaps that's because I've become prettier—haven't I? They certainly see I'm happy, and that makes them kindly disposed, so that they are cheerful and nice to me without suspecting why. If they knew!——»

Martin didn't like to hear her talk of their happiness. It was a different thing to read it in her eyes and her color and to feel it in her kisses; he believed in it then, and no text could be more precious to interpret than that. But when he heard her talk about it he felt on his

breast a weight of bitterness and oppression at the thought of how little he had really given her and how full of faults and deficiencies her poor happiness was. He knew that the short minutes she spent with him took on such vivid color just because she had to pay for them with long days and nights of fear, fear lest she should suddenly lose what she had dared so much to win, fear that all of a sudden everything might end some day, her golden happiness turn to withered leaves, and she herself be left more poor and lonely than ever before. This fear never really left her, he knew.

Once, it had not been so long ago, they had arranged to meet at his house. The time was approaching, he was awaiting her, there was a ring at the door, and he hurried to open it. But it was not she; it was one of his friends who had come to sit and talk a while. He could not say he was engaged or that he was expecting a visit, or the friend would have met her on the stairs and taken in the whole thing. He said instead that he was just going on an important errand, put on his hat and coat, and they went out together. They had not gone far beyond the gate before he saw her coming along the street. She cast a frightened and uncertain glance at him and he raised his hat to her as he passed, politely and a little distantly, as he had to do so as not to betray her. He turned off into a side street to get rid of his friend and after a couple of minutes came back circuitously to his gate. She was walking in front of it in the rain and mud. He pressed her hand softly and they went up. But when she was inside the door he saw she was trembling with sobs.

There was no need of explanations; she had already understood the situation, but his curt and chilly greeting as he passed, while he was talking with a strange man, had been enough to rouse the secret fear in her blood; she had to give it vent, she had to weep, and she wept long and silently in his arms.

Ah! their poor happiness; it had given them much but it could not bear the bright and arid illumination of words; it could not endure being spoken of. All his tenderness could not give her the calm which accompanies a life that can be shown to the multitude and approved by them, nor could it in solitude prevent her from sometimes feeling ashamed and conscience-stricken. For because life had shown her two

different aspects, between which she could not see any connection, she had not one conscience but two. One told her she had acted rightly and that the time would come some day when no one would be able to understand any more why people had formerly concealed the love between man and woman in shame and filth and called it sin. But the other conscience said nothing about the future; it rose from the depths of the past, speaking with the accents of her dead mother and with voices from her home in the woods and from her childhood, when she knew nothing of the world or of herself, when everything was simple and one only needed to be good to have things go nicely.

On evenings when he had just left and she sat alone in her rented room with strange stupid furniture, amid which the bureau with the Empire mirror and the green stone top was the only thing that was hers and the only object to remind her of her childhood home, the old conscience would rise up and whisper many vulgar things into her ear. It whispered that both the women who married men repugnant to them so as to be provided for and the poor girls who sold their bodies from necessity were better than she was, for they had at least a reason for their conduct but she had none. It did not help that she thought of her great love and defended her course with that; the old conscience was prepared for such an argument and whispered in reply that it was not he who had kindled the fire in her blood; her own desire had blown upon the flame; the evil was in herself, and she was an abandoned creature who ought to be whipped with rods in the town hall, as people used to treat women of loose morals. Still worse things this conscience hit upon, whispering that he whom she loved would soon tire of her, nay, that he had already tired and despised her in his heart because she was always so willing to sin and had never denied him anything.

He knew all this, for she always let him share her troubles. He in turn always felt the same wonder and surprise at this philosophy: namely, that the same desire which in a man was so natural and simple and as easy to admit as hunger or thirst, should be for a woman a burning shame which must be quenched or concealed; this philosophy, which he never could comprehend emotionally, though he followed it in his reflections all the way to its source in the dusk of

ancient times, when woman was still man's property and when the sensual side of her nature was permitted, even praised, as far as it expressed her submission to the will of her master, but was considered criminal and shameful if it came from her own will. This philosophy was still so firmly rooted in woman that modest ladies often felt a secret shame in loving their husbands and longing for their embraces. He even recalled how he had once heard a woman of the streets divide her kind into the decent and the sluts, meaning by the decent those who only thought of giving themselves for money. As a matter of fact this division was more just and profound than she herself imagined. It had its origin in the policy of women inherited through millenniums from one generation to another, as necessity had dictated it from the beginning. Necessity bade a woman not to lower by generous prodigality the price of the commodity which was the only means of power for the weaker sex, the one thing which could save it from being wholly trampled down by the stronger. If the poor streetwalker had known her Bible better, she might in support of her classification have cited the savage anathemas of the prophet Ezekiel against the lascivious Ahala, who was not as other harlots, «whom a man must needs purchase with money.»

He realized all this quite well; life was too stingy to allow women to be lavish, and he condemned none of them, not even the modest. But he loved his generous mistress and consoled her as well as he might on the days when the warning voices within her had frightened and filled her with remorse. That was not hard for him to do, because when he was with her she felt no fear. But he knew also that there were days, nay, weeks, when she went about in consuming anxiety for fear she might have a child in spite of everything. He did not conceal from himself that this was the weak point in all secret love. He saw clearly how uneven the game must always be when one approached this point, how all the risk and danger lay on the side of the woman, and again he was secretly ashamed that it was not in his power to share with her the bitter as he shared the sweet. The risk of having a child was hers to begin with, and if this was avoided she had still the lack and emptiness of not being able to allow herself the happiness of motherhood. It cut him to the heart when he once saw her at twilight

take a strange child from the street in her arms and kiss it. But motherhood for her would have implied continual misery, as the world was now.

Neither of them had, however, been pampered by life; they had taught themselves not to covet any complete and unblemished happiness, and love had helped them to take all this as it had to be and ought to be taken.

She was ready now; she put out the candles in front of the mirror and waited a couple of minutes in the dark while he went ahead of her on the street, so that no one might meet them together on the stairway. On the street they sometimes ventured to walk together after it was dark, especially if the weather was misty or if there was rain or snow. On this particular evening the snow was falling so thick and white that nobody could have recognized them. People passed them in the white night like phantoms without name or distinction. Close together, nameless themselves and somewhat like the silhouettes which children cut out in pairs from folded paper, they made their way through the snow. She held his arm pressed to her bosom and both were silent.

—V—

It was dark in the house, and Martin had pushed up the slatted shutters of the box. No one could see them, nor from where he sat in his corner could he see anything of what was happening on the stage. He only heard lines and responses thrown out in the dark, and saw, or fancied he saw, their effects on the curving rows of pale human masks —a sloping flower bed full of large curious flowers, colorless as are plants that grow without sunlight, and not exactly beautiful as they waved gently, as if before an inaudible wind, or nodded on their stems from time to time.

He imagined he could recognize them all, whether because he had really met them so often on the street and in public places, where he had been one of them, that their faces had become fixed in his

subconscious memory; or because of the tendency of human faces to group themselves into a few types, so that one rarely seems to encounter a really new face.

Some of these faces, furthermore, he knew very well. Over yonder sat Henrik Rissler, his friend from boyhood. They seldom met now, and that was a pity, for Martin knew of no one with a better appreciation of friendship, ideas, and cigars than he. But he had now been married for several years and led a migratory life. He had not yet finished the odyssey of the newly married couple from one damp abode to another, always on the outside edge of the city, from the Vasa Quarter to South Stockholm, and from there to Kungsholm. But Martin had the conviction that they would find each other again, if life would only grant them both a little more repose.

And there, a bit farther down, that little wrinkled face that reminded one both of a child's and of an old man's—wasn't that another old schoolmate, wasn't it Josef Marin? He had never become a clergyman as he should have according to the ideas of his obstinate old mother. But he never got firm in his faith. It is often with faith as with appetite—it comes with eating; but he had never got to where the eating began, and he had also at bottom perhaps a thirst for sincerity which made his course a bit too difficult. Now he covered the music halls and funerals for a large newspaper. He wrote unreservedly what he thought and took pains to think as he supposed the editor did; and the editor, who was the deuce of a fellow and could think whatever he wanted to, was careful to think as he imagined the educated and well-to-do folk of the community thought. And because these principles had set the tone of the paper, it had become popular and respected and very old, having a fixed reputation for incorruptible honesty and unpartisan love of truth.

«I might really just as well have become a clergyman,» he had said one day to Martin, rather mournfully, when they were exchanging a few words at a street corner.

And there, far up in the center, that pale slender woman—was it not she who had been his flame on certain spring evenings many years ago, Harriet Skottë? He had written her a letter, too, which had never been sent. Ah! those days.... Life had gone a bit poorly with her since

then; she did not look happy. She was married now, and her husband was beside her. He was fat, very well dressed and looked as if he had been varnished. Poor little child, she hadn't been too lucky in her marriage choice—one could tell that by a look at her husband....

And he saw other faces, those of women whom he knew slightly although they didn't know him, young women whom he kept in friendly remembrance because sometime without their being aware he had been a little richer and happier when they had floated past him on the street like sunlit clouds.... Down there was one whom he remembered well, for she had once noted his glance and had pulled her skirts around her and given him a look as if he were a murderer of the Jack the Ripper type. Poor little lady! the time had flown, she was no longer young, for she had then been in her late bloom, and now she would get no more such glances when she went down Sture Street....

He grew tired of looking at one thing and listening to another. The deep and wonderful old words which sounded from the stage said nothing to him at the moment, and he thought he could read by the masks in the parquet that the words recoiled unheard from them too, and that they scarcely comprehended more of what occurred on the stage than the mere pantomime. It was the fifth act. He leaned back in his corner, letting the two grave-diggers toss about skulls and witticisms as they chose, while he sought in the dark the glance of his mistress. But he did not catch it, because she could see everything from her place and never took her eyes from the stage. Then once more the words took on color and life to his ears, when he saw the eagerness in her face; and the whole churchyard scene, which he could not see but which he knew so well, seemed to be mirrored in her glance. He saw Hamlet stand there in his mantle of night and mystery with Yorick's skull in his hand, he saw the funeral procession, the lowering of the coffin, and the queen as she strewed flowers on the grave: «Sweets to the sweet.» He saw the strange struggle in the grave, the two men wrestling down there, and he heard Hamlet's voice, «I loved Ophelia.»

What did he want—did he want to tear her out of the grave? Suppose she were not dead, suppose she should arise from the coffin now as if after a quiet sleep—wouldn't he take her in his arms and

carry her away and love her to the end of days? No, it was not as he thought. He had said while she was still alive, «Lady, I loved you once.» He was no ordinary fickle cavalier, he had not forgotten her for another lady-in-waiting with a slenderer waist and a deeper bosom, and still he could say, «I loved you once.» He could possibly say that of many things. He had loved the sun, and the flowers and the trees. The blue heavens he had loved, and water and fire and the good brown earth. He had loved all that; to all the four elements and to life itself he might have said, «I loved you once.» But then things had changed, there was something which stole in between all this and him, something which took him in its grasp without asking any leave and drove away everything else, the sun and the flowers and the women and Woman, far away, so that he hardly saw it any more except as if through a mist.... And now when he saw the funeral procession come, and heard that it was for her whom he had had and had lost—but he also knew that he had lost her and all the rest before she was dead, and the very loss seemed real to him only at the first moment; at the next he saw it far off, through a mist.

Martin had shut his eyes, and when he opened them again, he himself saw everything through a mist: the parquet and the white masks down there and her whom he loved.

She took his hand and caressed it softly between her two warm hands while she whispered to him, «Tell me, what are you thinking of?»



The winter night slept around them. It snowed no longer, and they went home in a white moonlit mist through the snowdrifts, in through her door and up the stairs. It got brighter and brighter the higher they climbed. They stopped at a stairway window and looked out. The greater part of the mist was now below them, it lay wrapped around the yards and open spaces beneath, but in the upper regions of the air everything was almost clear; it was bluish and bright as a night in August. A wide ring of light was around the moon, and in the pale glow the world lay as if ice-bound and petrified. Out of the ocean of mist down there arose a lonely gable wall without a window, which absorbed the cold glance of the moon and stared blindly and emptily back. A long shiver went through them both, they pressed hard against each other, closing their eyes, and everything was lost to them in a kiss.

It became a long and wonderful kiss. He felt all her being dissolve, while he heard in his ears the sound of distant bells from a little country church far away between hedges and wheat fields. It seemed to be a Sunday morning: he saw a neat gravel plot, red peonies were glowing from the flower beds, white and yellow butterflies were fluttering about the bushes and the lawn, and he heard the rustling of

mighty trees. He was walking with her among the trees, but through their murmur passed a breath of autumn, the yellow butterflies were yellow leaves, and some were already dark with frost. The wind carried with it broken accents and words, which were sometimes like the dry words of everyday speech, sometimes like furtive whispers about something that had to be kept secret, with all of which was blended as it were the echo of the actor's strange intonation a little while before when he said, «I loved Ophelia.»

But he did not relinquish her mouth. They sank ever more deeply into one another. He seemed to be voyaging through space: in the white moon-mist burned a red star, first faint and expiring, then more powerful and ever nearer, growing and broadening into a flaming spring of fire, to which he fastened his lips tightly. He seemed to burn without suffering, the flames cooled his tongue like a slightly bitter wine, until he felt that he was drinking in everything: satiety and hunger, thirst and coolness, the sun's health and the midnight's anguish, the lucid thought of day and the morbid brooding of moonlit dusk, all the joy and all the misery of the earth—from this one spring.

Colophon

Martin Birck's Youth
Hjalmar Söderberg

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