

Verbundkatalog Kalliope

Caroline Björnson.

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B-7 Klaus I. Mann

When I try to remember the most remarkable, most impressive individual I ever met, many different faces are looming up - a confusing multitude of characters - illustrious men and attractive women. But there is among them ^{one} weird and mysterious figure who proves more powerful and unforgettable than all the others. It is a very old woman - in fact, the oldest human being I ever had a chance to come in contact with.

I would like to tell the odd story of my visit to that extraordinary personality, Madame Caroline Björnson, widow of the great Norwegian poet Björn ^{Stjerne} Björnson. She was almost a hundred years old when I went to see her, at her country house, in Aulestadt, Norway.

I had known her, years before, when her celebrated husband was still alive, and the famous couple was in the habit of touring Europe - surrounded by their many friends and admirers, cordially hailed where ever they appeared. After the death of great Björnson, his five children - three sons and two daughters - lived scattered all over Europe or settled temporarily in Oslo, capital of Norway. ~~There~~ Their mother, however, remained faithful to Aulestadt - the idyllic and picturesque place from where her late husband - mighty representative of Scandinavian literature and intellectual progress - had influenced and even dominated, for so many years, the cultural life of his country.

Before we reached Aulestadt, on our motor-car trip across Norway, many people asked us if we intended to visit "Mother Björnson" - as though she were one of the national curiosities no traveller must miss - a famous grotto or an ancient temple. There were malicious rumours, circulating in the somewhat provincial literary circles of Oslo, as to the queer methods employed by the younger Björnson generation for prolonging their mother's life. They made her drink and swallow the most appalling concoctions - according to that insidious sort of gossip - , and even

went as far as to hire young peasant maids to warm her freezing body during the long, icy winter nights. Thus they did - we were told - because the fine country seat was to become a National Museum and a property of the State, once "Mother" had passed away.

We didn't believe, of course, in this evil talk inspired by envy and superstition. For we knew the Björnsons well enough not to doubt the disinterested sincerity of their devotion to their venerable ancestress. - We went to Aulestadt - not with the idle curiosity of sight-seers, but in order to see an old friend again - probably for the last time...

We had to wait, half-an-hour or so, in a spacious drawing-room, while she was being dressed by her maids. The atmosphere was somehow tense - full of expectation, like in the antechambre of a monarch who delays capriciously his pompous entrance. Finally she appeared - walking very slowly, constantly shaking her head as in a perpetual astonishment - a tiny, stooping figure, propped on a vigorous peasant girl.

We hardly recognized her: the expression, even the very shape of her face had changed in an amazing way since we had last seen her. It was not only that she had "aged", in the ordinary sense of the word; she had somehow surpassed the limits of human nature ~~and~~ had turned inhuman, petrified, numbed and iced -, and at the same time assumed a ~~grave~~ ^{divine} majesty that was more moving, indeed, more ravishing than the nimble grace of any juicy youth.

She was dressed all in white: the tiny shoes, the socks, the loose garment - everything immaculately clean. Her face also was white, and so were her trembling hands and the thin, silky hair. Completely white she was - a white shadow: indescribably light, almost weightless; dried out, purified, devoid of all heavy liquids - of blood, sweat and tears.

Her wrinkled face was dominated by the disproportionately high attic of an imposing forehead - under which the eyes seemed colourless, blind and

empty. She was not really blind though, but noticed us presently as she entered the room. "Guten Tag, guten Tag!" she croaked in an at once shrill and toilsome voice, and made several beckoning little gestures with her withered hands. Curiously enough, she remembered that we were Germans, and - which seems ^{even} more surprising! - she was still capable of pronouncing a few ragged words in the foreign tongue. We tried to answer - to tell her how very happy we were to find her in such an excellent state of health; but she turned out to be completely deaf. What ever we said, she just giggled - and then, all of a sudden, pointed at the many portraits adorning the walls and tables. "All dead...", she uttered - still chuckling and constantly shaking her head. "All of them... dead, dead, dead..."

It was rather appalling. The portraits to which she referred showed her husband in varied poses and costumes; moreover, an impressive parade of relatives and friends - Hendrik Ibsen, and Edvard Grieg, and many another representative of Scandavian glory. She had known all of them - the entire "great generation" - , and with most of them she had been intimately related. Her son Einar was married to one of Ibsen's daughters, and her daughter Bergliot, the singer, was the wife of Sigurd Ibsen, the great playwright's son. She had participated in all the triumphs and quarrels, fights and festivals, tragedies and romances of those two distinguished families - Björnson and Ibsen -; she had lived to witness the most imposing careers and the most dreary failures among her countless friends and enemies, her brothers and sisters, cousins, children and grand-children - and now she sat there, surrounded by an assembly of glorious shadows, and insisted, with a rather horrifying hilarity: "Dead... the whole crowd!... Funny, isn't it..". Then she added - mysteriously shaken by a weird merriment - : "And we too ... will be dead... all of us....: pretty soon..." —

I shall try to describe and analyse in a more detailed way the strange blend of ~~the~~ sublime dignity and senile decay in her character. I want to show her as she inspected eagerly our car, quivering with a child-like

curiosity - at once fascinated and frightened by modern technique. I may present her at the dinner table - nibbling tiny little bits of food, glut-tunous and fastidious as a spoiled infant; then suddenly drooping, already half-asleep - mumbling senseless fragments of Norwegian phrases, like a northern witch whispering magic words.

It was not merely her high age, of course, which made her so enchanting and so appalling. Her exorbitant vitality and intellectual independence let her seem akin to certain other "grand old ladies", such as the French Empress Eugénie or Frau Cosima Wagner, who survived their own historical epoch and appeared in our time as venerable and yet somewhat macabre remnants of past greatness and glory. The most remarkable feature of those indestructable beings is that they seemingly ~~sur~~ surpass the very limits of civilization, indeed, the natural bounds of mankind. They transform themselves into prodigious figures, utterly remote from anything that saddens or satisfies other men and women. They giggle on death, are scared by a bicycle, or suddenly numbed with an inscrutable melancholy. They are impish and incalculable as the wind or the rain or an animal. At the same time, however, they have assumed a sort of mysterious wisdom for which they have been venerated, even worshipped, by all primitive tribes.

Old Mother Björnson, in her neat white robe, resembled the high-priest of an ancient religious sect - and, at the same time, she had baby-like features. Her colourless, oblivious eyes had a weird, somehow breath-taking way of looking straight through the things, as though she were able to perceive another more authentic reality behind the ordinary one which we know.

As I watched her, with a sort of apprehensive admiration, I ~~understood~~ realized what it means to be "old as the hills." It means - to have experienced ~~overcome~~ and ~~forgotten~~ the enormous multitude of human problems, tragedies and emotions; to be initiated in all sorts of human mysteries - and to be

infinitely aloof from all of them. - Mother Caroline, being old as the hills, had become something akin to those northern mountain-ghosts and whimsical demons who play so important a rôle in the Scandinavian fairy-tales. As I kissed her hand before leaving, I had a feeling as if my lips touched a piece of brittle wood or of an ancient, very delicate marble. Her eyes - those unfathomable holes under the steep, stone-like forehead - looked straight through me. I shuddered as if the Goddess of Destiny were bidding me farewell as she murmured, with a grand and absent-minded smile:

"It's a funny world. Good luck to you, my child."