

Love's Comedy

A Comedy in THREE ACTS

By

Henrik Ibsen (1862)

Translated by John Northam

I b s e n . n e t

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PREFACE

This is a sadly neglected work, rarely performed. Michael Meyer describes it as “A brilliant poem rather than an poetic play crippled by the untheatricality of its form”. It achieved its final form by 1862, but its composition was already well advanced by 1860. The earliest draft was entitled ‘Svanhild’ and was written in prose (see *Oxford Ibsen*, James MacFarlane vol II).

When published in 1863 it was unfavourably reviewed, largely on moral grounds, as a denigration of both love and marriage, whereas for Ibsen it was a sympathetic exploration of the tensions that can exist between aestheticism and domesticity, a theme that he had already explored in the poem ‘On the Heights’.

Ibsen himself thought highly of the work. In a letter to Hartvig Lassen, 24th October 1872, he wrote “I am ... convinced that it cannot be faulted. All in all I reckon ‘Love’s Comedy’ to be amongst the best things that I have done” — this after having written ‘Brand’ and ‘Peer Gynt’.

The moral objections to the play can be ignored, but its untheatricality can be challenged. It is true that the rhymed verse probably remains a considerable obstacle to performance nowadays, but in other respects ‘Love’s Comedy’ deserves attention as a great stride towards Ibsen’s later modern plays. ‘Love’s Comedy’ is the first of the plays — if we except *St John’s Night* — not to derive its story and stature from an old source — history, saga, legend, ballad. Instead Ibsen creates his own story out of the apparently small-scale events of contemporary suburban life, its characters, setting, language and domestic predicaments. Yet out of this apparently trivial material Ibsen constructs a searching enquiry into a theme that is explored again and again in his later modern plays — the Kierkegaardian conflict between aesthetics and ethics. Moreover, the deeply serious theme that lurks beneath the comic surface owed much to Ibsen’s own experience of married life. Suzannah, his wife, was the inspiration for *Svanhild*, the aesthetic/ethical dilemma was one that he himself had faced.

Even the verse form characterises brilliantly, in its contemporary idiom, his social types: the dreary phraseology of Styver the law clerk, the fussing of the ladies, the dull prudentiality of Lind, the impressive sincerity of Guldstad and the rapturous intensity of Falk and *Svanhild* — demonstrate a new mastery. The stage directions by which Ibsen orchestrated the constant flurry of movement reveal a fully dramatic skill.

Unactable or not, the play abounds in a new immediacy, verbal dexterity and dramatic vitality, and merits more attention than it has been given.

Cast List

(with English equivalents)

Mrs Halm (Chaff)

Svanhild)
) her daughters
Anna)

Falk (Falcon)

Lind (Linden)

Guldstad (Goldville)

Styver (Tanner i.e. sixpence)

Miss Skjære (Magpie)

Strawman (Strawman)

ACT I

(The scene presents an attractive garden irregularly but tastefully laid out; in the background, the fjord and outlying islands. To audience left, the main building, with a verandah and an open dormer window above; in the right foreground an open summer-house with table and seats. The landscape is bathed in strong evening light. Early summer; fruit trees in bloom.)

(When the curtain rises, Mrs Halm, Anna and Miss Skjære are sitting on the verandah, the two former with needlework, the latter with a book. Falk, Lind, Guldstad and Styver can be seen inside the summer-house; on the table, a pitcher of punch and glasses. Svanhild sits alone in the background by the water.)

Falk (rises with an upraised glass and sings)

Day's decline `mid garden hedges
was designed for your delight;
don't reflect that springtime's pledges
autumn seldom honours quite.
Apple-blossom, whitely spreading,
weaves its awning o'er your head, —
let it, weather-worn and shedding,
strew by evening every bed.

Chorus of men

Let it, weather-worn and shedding *etc*

Falk

While the tree is still a-blooming
how can you then ask for fruit?
Why be sighing, why be glooming,
dulled by chores and toil to boot?
Wherefore let the scarecrow clatter
on its stick by night and day?
Happy brothers, bird-song chatter
sounds a better roundelay!

10

Men

Happy brothers *etc*

Falk

Wherefore chase away the sparrow
from your bloom-sprays ere they drop?
Let it, for its song's sake, harrow
one by one, your looked-for crop.
Trust me, you will profit, buying
present song with later fruit;
heed the saying "Time is flying";
outdoor songs will soon fall mute.

20

Men

Heed the saying "Time is flying" *etc*

Falk I shall live, shall keep on singing
till the final hedge has died;
sweep the rubbish up, start flinging, 30
calmly, the whole lot aside.
Lay the fence; let livestock wander,
grub and grab as each sees best;
I plucked flowers; I'll not ponder
who's to have the dead bequest.

Men I plucked flowers *etc*
(*they chink and empty their glasses*)

Falk (to the ladies)
Well, there's the song you said you'd like to hear; —
bear with it; I was somewhat dull, I fear.

Guldstad So what, so long as it's a song that's stirring?

Miss Skjære (looking about)
But Svanhild who was very keen, I swear — ? 40
When Falk began, she left, with her wings whirring;
and now she's gone.

Anna (pointing off) She's not, she's sitting *there*.

Mrs Halm (with a sigh)
That child! God knows where she's learnt such behaviour!

Miss Skjære But Mr Falk, I thought the song lacked savour,
just at the end, lacked — sort of — poetry,
which here and there it showed in some degree.

Styver Yes, simple, surely, to make up the lack
by adding just a little to the ending.

Falk (chinks glasses with him)
Work putty in, like filling up a crack,
until its smooth as marble, flush and blending. 50

Styver (blandly)
Yes, that's the way; I well remember it
from my experience.

Guldstad What? *You* served the Muse?

Miss Skjære What, my fiancé? Yes!

Styver O, just a bit.

Miss Skjære (to the ladies)
He's so romantic.

Mrs Halm That's the word we'd choose!

Styver Not any more though; that was long ago.

Falk Romance and varnish both wear off we know.
But were you really — ?

Styver Yes, about the time
when I was, well, in love.

Falk Now past its prime?
I didn't know you'd woken from your passion!

Styver But I've become engaged in formal fashion; 60
that means much more than being in love, to me!

Falk Quite so, my friend, quite so, I quite agree!

You've been promoted, now the worst is over:
from wooer to fiancé; you're in clover.

Styver (with a pleasant, reminiscent smile)
And yet it's strange! The difficulty *I'm* in
is I scarce credit memory, you know.
Would you believe it — seven years ago
I'd sit there in the office quietly rhyming.

Falk You sat there rhyming — at the desk what's more?

Styver No, table.

Guldstad Silence, give the clerk the floor. 70

Styver Especially evenings, when my time was free,
I drafted reams on reams of poetry,
so many — but, on scraps — that's all they were.
It worked!

Falk You simply gave your Muse the spur,
and off she —

Styver Stamped, unstamped, at any rate
the paper seemed to suit her, it was fine.

Falk And so the verses flowed, a flood in spate?
But tell me how you gained the Muse's shrine.

Styver With love's own jemmy, that is how my friend!
In other words, it was Miss Skjære here, 80
my dearest as it turned out in the end,
who at the time —

Falk Was your plain, simple *dear*.

Styver (continuing)
It was a strange time; law? — well, I cocooned it;
I didn't trim my pen, o no, I *tuned* it,
and as it scratched rough drafts out, I would gloat, —
it harmonised with everything I wrote; —
at last I managed to send off a note
to her — she —

Falk Whose fiancé you became.

Styver Just fancy, by return her answer came;
"Request accepted, matter closed" — and name! 90

Falk And at the desk you felt yourself expand;
you'd hooked your sweetheart, brought her safe to land!

Styver Of course I did!

Falk Since then, no versifying?

Styver No, never felt the impulse since that time;
it seemed my vein of poetry was drying;
and when occasionally I've tried to rhyme
a New Year's greeting, just a line or two,
the rhyme and metre turned out all askew,
and, — why it should be is a mystery, —
what comes out now is *law*, not *poetry*. 100

Guldstad (clinks glasses with him)
Why then, upon my soul, luck's on your side!
(*to Falk*) You think the ferry trip on fortune's tide
is just to get *you*, you alone across;

but think before you risk the pitch and toss.
 As for your song, I can't assess, not really,
 if it is poetry in all respects;
 for all its twists and turns though, one rejects
 the *moral*, which is foul — I speak sincerely.
 Call such a wastefulness economy?
 To let all sorts of birds feed — it's amazing — 110
 on fruit-buds, still unripened on the tree,
 allow the sheep and cattle to run free
 and feed in here as though on summer grazing?
 A pretty sight, eh, Mrs Halm, next spring!

Falk Ah, next, ah next! I find it sickening,
 the implication of the word — it runs
 the risk of beggaring life's lucky ones!
 If I enjoyed a language-sultan's power,
 could use a silken noose for just one hour
 I'd rid the world of it remorselessly 120
 as Knudsen's grammar banished b and g. *

Styver What's wrong, then, with a word that's hopeful, bright?
Falk That it enshrouds God's lovely world in night.
 "Our next beloved one" and "Our next wife",
 and "Our next dinner time" and "Our next life", —
 yes, the foresightedness implied's what runs
 the risk of beggaring life's lucky ones.
 So long as that befouls our times, you see,
 it robs delight of spontaneity;
 you get no peace until you've sculled your boat 130
 with toil towards "the next" shore, though remote;
 but once you've got there, dare you rest, then, yonder?
 No, you must seek a "next" one — must still wander.
 And so it goes through life — the speed is taxing, —
 God knows if the hereafter's more relaxing.

Mrs Halm But Mr Falk, how could you be so gruff!
Anna But I can understand him well enough;
 there's something hidden there, not just a whim.

Miss Skjære My fiancé mustn't listen to such stuff.
 He's an eccentric, don't encourage him; 140
 come here a moment!

Styver (busy cleaning his pipe) Yes, I'm coming dear.

Guldstad (to Falk) Well now, at least there's one thing I've got clear:
 that *you* don't honour foresight half enough
 by any means, — just think, suppose you sit
 and write a poem, putting into it
 the capital you've built up, value highly,
 of inspiration and next morning — why!
 you find your source of inspiration's dry; —
 the critics would combine to drive you crazy.

Falk I find that bankrupt notion somewhat hazy; 150
 for then I and the critic gang would stroll

the same road, arm in arm, friends on the whole.

(breaks off and changes the subject)

But tell me Lind, how go things? 'Pon my soul
you sit there in a mood of glum conjecture;
perhaps you're studying the architecture?

Lind (pulls himself together) Whatever gives you that idea?

Falk

Why, you;

the balcony provides no fetching view.
Perhaps it's the verandah's columnation
you're looking at with such deep concentration.
The doors maybe, their scrolled, chic furniture,
the shutters likewise rich in art's allure?
There's something that attracts you, that's for sure.

160

Lind (his face beaming)

No, you are wrong; I'm sitting here just basking
in *real life*, here and now, it's all I'm asking.
I have a feeling that I stand replete
with all earth's riches spread before my feet!
Thanks for your song about life's vernal zest;
it could have been carved out of my own breast!
(raises his glass and exchanges glances with Anna, unnoticed by the others)

Here's to the fragrant blossom on its shoot,
with ne'er a thought of turning into fruit! *(drains his glass)*

170

Falk (looks at him, surprised and touched, but forces himself to adopt a bantering tone)

Just hear that, ladies; that was something new!
I've made a proselyte, quite swiftly too.
A prayer-book in his pocket yesterday,
but now it's the poetic drum he'd play. —
It's right — we poets must be born, not made;
yet sometimes one of the prosaic trade
grows fat, like Strasbourg geese force-fed with corn,
on rhyming rubbish, metres lacking brawn,
till innards, liver, lights and soul, when drawn,
are found congested, stiff and clotted hard
with grease rhetorical and lyric lard. *(to Lind)*
But all the same, thanks for your good intention;
henceforth we'll smite the harp without dissension.

180

Miss Skjære Yes, Mr Falk, are *you* kept busy here?

In rustic peace — amongst the blooming flowers,
where you can haunt, alone, the pensive bowers — —

Mrs Halm (smiling)

No, he's an idler — you have no idea.

Miss Skjære As Mrs Halm's guest, it would be surprising
if you'd not worked hard here at poetising. *(points off right)*
That garden house screened by the bushes there
is simply made to be a poet's lair;
you must have been inspired, I do declare — —

190

Falk (moves across to the verandah and rests his arm on the paling)

Let blindness spread infection on my sight
 and I'll write poems on the heavenly light.
 Provide me, if for but a month, on loan,
 some grief, some crushing sorrow to bemoan *
 and I'll extol in song life's joyfulness.
 Or best, supply me with a bride to bless,
 to be my all — light, sun, my God no less.
 I've begged the Lord to grant my prayer, but lately
 He's seemed to be quite deaf, unfortunately. 200

Miss Skjære Fi, that was frivolous!

Mrs Halm Could well offend.

Falk O, don't think for a moment I'd intend
 that we'd seek, hand in hand, some pleasure-dome,
 no, while the joy's most boisterous, she must wend
 her way, depart for our eternal home.
 I need a bit of spiritual P.E.,
 and *that* could be the very thing for me.

Svanhild (who has meanwhile approached; she now stands close to Falk and speaks to him with a firm but whimsical expression)
 Good, I shall wish you such a destiny.
 But when it happens, bear it like a man. 210

Falk (turns, disconcerted) My, my, Miss Svanhild! — I'll be armed, you'll see!
 But do you, too, imagine that I can
 trust *your* wish isn't out of all proportion?
 Where Heaven's concerned, you see, one acts with caution.
 You've will enough for two, that's plain to see,
 to rob my mind of its tranquillity,
 but whether you've the faith required will be
 the thing to prove.

Svanhild (half joking, half in earnest) Wait for the coming sorrow
 that sears life's gleaming verdure on the morrow, —
 wait till it gnaws you in your dreams or waking, 220
 then you can judge my wish, and no mistaking. (*crosses to the ladies*)

Mrs Halm (under her breath) O, will the pair of them not call a truce?
 You've angered Mr Falk, and what's the use?
 (*continues talking quietly and severely. Miss Skjære joins in the conversation. Svanhild stands cold and silent*)

Falk (after a brief, thoughtful silence, crosses to the summer-house and speaks to himself)
 Her every glance just blazes with conviction.
 If only I believed, as she does clearly,
 that Heaven would —

Guldstad By God, it wouldn't, really!
 It would be, with respect, a dereliction
 if things were ordered that way, I assure you.
 No, look dear fellow — what you need to cure you
 is exercise, for trunk, extremities. 230
 Don't lie there gazing up into the trees
 the live-long day; if nothing else, try hewing.
 It would be damned bad luck were you still stewing,

and hadn't, in a fortnight, broken free
completely from your crazy fantasy.

Falk I'm like the ass faced with a choice, bound tight;
flesh to the left of me, soul to the right;
which one would it be wisest to choose first?

Guldstad (filling the glasses)
A glass of punch that quenches care and thirst.

Mrs Halm (looking at her watch)
It's nearly eight; I fancy our respected
dear pastor may arrive soon, he's expected. 240
(stands up and starts tidying the verandah)

Falk What, pastors? Coming here?

Miss Skjære Good Lord, why not!

Mrs Halm Precisely what I told you — you forgot.

Anna No, mother, Mr Falk was not around.

Mrs Halm That's right. But don't be glum, you'll gain a lot;
you'll reap a pleasant harvest, I'll be bound.

Falk But tell me who he is, joy's seed-broadcaster!

Mrs Halm Good heavens, Mr Strawman, it's our pastor.

Falk I see. I fancy that I've heard his name
and read that he'll involve himself, earn fame 250
in parliamentary business just by talking.

Styver Yes, orator.

Guldstad A shame he can't stop hawking.

Miss Skjære He's coming with his wife —

Mrs Halm And with his offspring —

Falk To give them all an outing, that's the pull,
before he finds he's got his both hands full
with Swedish problems, parliamentary jostling;
I see.

Mrs Halm A real *man*, of heroic stamp.

Guldstad Well, in his younger days he was a scamp.

Miss Skjære (offended)
Why, Mr Guldstad! Since I was a child
I've heard opinions voiced, of great respect, — 260
and that by folk whose word one can't reject, —
of Pastor Strawman and his life's romance.

Guldstad (laughing) Romance!

Miss Skjære Romance. I'd call his life romantic,
though it's what common people view askance.

Falk You stir my curiosity, I'm frantic.

Miss Skjære (continuing)
But Heaven help us, there are always folk
who can't resist the chance to make a joke
of what's inspiring. It's notorious, really
that we've had someone here, a student merely,
who was so brazen, dissolute and low 270
that he mocked "William Russell" don't you know. *

Falk Is he a poem in some sort of way,
this country priest, a sort of Christian play?

Miss Skjære (fighting back her tears)

No, Falk, — a man of feeling, I would say.
But when a book, a wholly lifeless thing
can be the cause of such vile gossiping,
stir passions of such ugliness and strength,
so deeply felt, too, —

Falk (joining in) And of such a length —

Miss Skjære Well then, with your sharp eyes, you'll quickly see
the point, which is —

Falk Yes, very clear to me. 280

But what has puzzled me though, hitherto,
is the romance's content and its kind.
It's something charming, that may well be true;
but whether it is easily defined —

Styver I'll summarise the main facts appertaining
to this case —

Miss Skjære No, let *me* do the explaining;
I know the story.

Mrs Halm I, too, if I may!

Miss Skjære No Mrs Halm, please let me have my say.
Look, Mr Falk, — when he took his degree
he ranked amongst the best brains in the city,
well-versed in critics, latest trends — and witty — 290

Mrs Halm And acted, sometimes, too — but privately.

Miss Skjære Just wait a bit! He played, he painted, drew —

Mrs Halm And think, the lovely tales he told us too.

Miss Skjære Give me a chance; I'll get to that in time.
He wrote and set to music a sublime
creation for some publisher — in rhyme;
it's called "Seven Sonnets written for my Mary".
Heavens, sang to the guitar so debonairly!

Mrs Halm He was a genius — no more need be said. 300

Guldstad (under his breath) Hm, some believe the chap was off his head.

Falk A wise old bird who didn't get his learning
just from old parchments green with mouldy growth,
said Petrarchs are created by love's yearning
as patriarchs are from blockheads and from sloth.
But who was Mary?

Miss Skjære Mary? Why, his dear
belovèd, as you are about to hear.
She was the daughter of a company —

Guldstad A timber firm.

Miss Skjære (cutting in) God knows, you may be right.

Guldstad Dealt in Dutch timber, shipped to us by sea. 310

Miss Skjære Such details are quite trivial and trite.

Falk A company?

Miss Skjære (continuing) With lots and lots invested.
You can imagine how the wooing went.
It's said the grandest suitors would present —

Mrs Halm And one, a chamberlain, quite interested.

Miss Skjære But Mary knew her woman's rights off pat.
She first met Strawman at a Green Room do:
she saw, she fell for him and that was that —

Falk And left the crowd of suitors there to stew?

Mrs Halm Yes, wasn't that romance? You think so too? 320

Miss Skjære And add to that a gruesome old Papa
who'd sever hearts at sweet love's first appearance;
there was a guardian, too, I think, to bar
their way, make matters worse by interference.
But she and he stood firmly by their troth;
they dreamt of a snug cottage, with straw thatch,
a snow-white sheep, enough to feed them both —

Mrs Halm And one small cow, not more, to graze the patch.

Miss Skjære In brief, as they would tell me frequently:
a stream, a hut and hearts in harmony. 330

Falk Ah yes! And then — ?

Miss Skjære She broke with kith and kin.

Falk She broke — ?

Mrs Halm She broke with them.

Falk She risked her skin!

Miss Skjære And moved in with her Strawman in his attic.

Falk Moved in! No wedding — sort of morganatic?

Miss Skjære O fie!

Mrs Halm For shame! My husband — late — attended
amongst the witnesses —

Styver Yes, your erratic
omission caused confusion not intended.
In giving evidence what carries weight
is getting sequences and details straight.
But I can't grasp, however hard I battle, 340
what they were up to —

Falk (picking up the thread) — for one must assume
there's little space for sheep, still less for cattle,
in your conventional, small attic room.

Miss Skjære But my good friend, there's one thing you've omitted:
where love's enthroned no thought of *want's* admitted;
two tender hearts need little, don't you see? (*to Falk*)
He wooed her by guitar in tuneful fashion,
she on the clavier disclosed her passion —

Mrs Halm And then, of course, they borrowed, he and she —

Guldstad The firm went bankrupt simultaneously. 350

Mrs Halm Then Strawman got a living somewhere north.

Miss Skjære And, in a letter that I've seen, poured forth
devotion to his duty and his wife.

Falk (chipping in) And that concluded his *romantic* life.

Mrs Halm (rising) I think a stroll about the garden would
be nice, to greet our visitors you know.

Miss Skjære (putting on her mantle)
It's chilly.

Mrs Halm Svanhild, would you be so good

and fetch my shawl?
Lind (to Anna, unnoticed by the others) You go ahead!
Mrs Halm Let's go.
(Svanhild goes into the house; the others, except Falk, go off left at the rear. Lind, who has followed them, halts and comes back)
Lind My friend!
Falk My friend to you!
Lind Give me your hand!
I am so glad; — I think my heart will burst 360
if I can't talk about it —
Falk Don't rush; first
you must be tried and sentenced and then hanged.
Why this behaviour? Trying to conceal
from me, your friend, the treasure that you've found; —
own up, I guessed correctly I'll be bound;
you've drawn a ticket on good fortune's wheel!
Lind Yes, I have caught luck's lovely bird for real.
Falk What? Caught alive — not strangled in the snare?
Lind Just wait a bit; it won't take long, I swear.
I am engaged! Just think — !
Falk Engaged!
Lind God knows 370
how I could find the courage to propose!
I said, — o, things like that you can't repeat;
just think — that she, so lovely, young and sweet —
she fairly blushed — was not put out at all!
Can you imagine, Falk, how I've rampaged!
She heard me out, — it seemed a tear might fall;
is that a *good* sign?
Falk Yes, go on, complete.
Lind O, then it's true? — we really are engaged?
Falk I should imagine; but to make things clearer,
past doubt, you really should consult Miss Skjære. 380
Lind O no, I feel so confident, secure!
I am so clear about it, certain, sure.
(beaming and confidential)
Just think, she let me hold her hand back there, —
as she was tidying the coffee table!
Falk (raising his glass and draining it)
Well — may spring flowers crown the happy pair!
Lind (following suit) And I'll proclaim, as loudly as I'm able,
by all that's holy, as I now do here,
I'll love her till I die; she's such a dear!
Falk Engaged! So that's the reason why you've quit
the law and prophets, shelved them and instead — 390
Lind (laughing) And you believed it was *your* song, that *it* — !
Falk My friend, most poets have a swollen head.
Lind (seriously) But Falk, don't think theology's forefended,
expelled from bliss's Eden by the rod.
The difference merely is — books aren't intended

to be a Jacob's ladder to my God.
 Now I must go and seek Him out by *living*,
 I feel I am a better man at heart;
 I love the worm, the straw I tread — it's part
 of the delight my happiness is giving. 400

Falk But tell me now —

Lind You've heard the lot, completely, —
 the treasure-trove that we three share discreetly.

Falk But have you thought — the future, for a start — ?

Lind The future? Thought? Henceforth, I'll tell you this,
 I'll live the spring-like moment to the full.
 It's home I'll look to for my future bliss,
 we'll rein in fate however hard it pull.
 Not Guldstad, you, — not even Mrs Halm
 dare bid my fresh life's bloom "Fade! Lose your charm!"
 I have the will, and *she* such loving eyes, 410
 and so my flower *must* thrive, *shall* seek the skies.

Falk How right, my brother; joy needs men like you!

Lind My courage burns, a song that's full of cheer.
 I know my strength; should an abyss appear
 before my feet, though deep, — I'd leap that too.

Falk *That* means, when put in plain and simple words:
 your love's made you a reindeer, so it seems.

Lind Well, — should I journey with wild reindeer herds,
 I know where they will fly, my yearning dreams!

Falk By morning then you'll have to be all set; 420
 you're leaving with the quartet for up yonder.
 You'll not need any furs up there I bet.

Lind Quartet! Pah, — leave them on their own to wander!
 For me, the valley air is mountain-clear;
 here I've the flowers and the fjord's wide spaces,
 the bird-song chatter in the leaves' embraces,
 good fairies too, — o yes, because *she's* here!

Falk Ah, but good fairies, here in Akersdale, *
 are rare as elks; you grab them by the tail!
 (*glancing towards the house*)

Sssh, — Svanhild — .

Lind Right; I'm off, — don't cause a stir — 430
 this matter is between you, me and *her*.
 Thanks for your patient hearing — now enfold it,
 my secret, in your heart, warm as I told it.
 (*He goes off at the back to join the others*)
 (*Falk watches him for a moment and paces up and down in the garden a few times,
 clearly struggling to control the agitation he feels. Shortly afterwards Svanhild
 comes out of the house with a scarf over her arm and moves towards the rear. Falk
 take a step or two nearer and stares fixedly at her; Svanhild halts*)

Svanhild (after a brief pause)
 Why are you staring — ?

Falk (half to himself) Yes, that's the expression;

it casts a shadow on her eyes' deep sea,
 lurks round her mouth and plays there impishly,
 it's *there*.

Svanhild What? I'm half-frightened — such aggression!

Falk They call you Svanhild?

Svanhild Yes, as well you know.

Falk But do *you* know, Miss, that the name's eccentric?
 Do me a favour, drop it, let it go! 440

Svanhild Fie, — that would be unfilial, egocentric —

Falk (laughs) Mmm, "Svanhild" — "Svanhild" — —
 (*suddenly serious*) Did they give you that
 memento mori at the infant stage?

Svanhild Why, is it ugly?

Falk No, so lovely that
 it's far too great and strong for this our age.
 How could a modern girl expect to match
 the thoughts inspired by Svanhild's name, no less?
 Get rid of it, a gown too old to patch.

Svanhild You're thinking of the saga-king's princess — *

Falk Crushed by a horse's hooves, though innocent. 450

Svanhild But nowadays the law would not consent.
 No, in the saddle! Often, when I'm dreaming,
 I've pictured me borne high upon a track
 that spans the wide world, brave, no looking back,
 the horse's mane, like freedom's banner, streaming!

Falk Yes, that's the old style. In your so-called dreaming
there none of us fear gates, bars don't deter,
there's no-one who's afraid to use the spur; —
in practice though, we very much prefer
 our terra firma — life's held dear, not cheap, 460
 and no-one risks his neck by jumping madly.

Svanhild (animated) Well, set the mark and I shall clear it, gladly!
 But then the mark must justify the leap.
 Some California screened beyond the sands, —
 if not, one stays precisely where one stands.

Falk (mockingly) I see; so it's *our times* it seems that fail.

Svanhild (with heat) It is our times indeed! Who would set sail
 when there's no lively breeze to stir the fjord?

Falk (ironically) Yes, why wear whip and spur when no award,
 no golden cup of victory awaits 470
 the man who leaves his home, his table-mates,
 high in his saddle ventures forth uncaring,
 to venture for the sake of venture, daring.
 And daring counts for little now we know;
 was that your meaning?

Svanhild Yes, exactly so;
 observe the pear tree by the fencing there, —
 how sparse of bloom it was this year, how bare.
 You should have seen it last year, though, weighed down
 with all the fruits that hung upon its crown.

Falk (somewhat baffled)

I well believe it; but interpret: where's — ? 480

Swanhild (with finesse) O, amongst other things, it goes to show
the greediness involved when modern heirs
of Zacharias keep demanding pears. — *

A tree that carried too much bloom, I fear
cannot expect to crop so well next year.

Falk I knew that you'd re-found the proper track
in history —, romances from way back.

Svanhild Yes — worth is valued now in different ways.
Who girds himself in truth's cause nowadays?
Who cares what role the individual plays? 490
Where have the heroes gone?

Falk (looks at her sharply) And the Valkyria?

Svanhild (tosses her head) Valkyries still survive here all the same!

When they attacked our faith last year in Syria,
did you crusade there in the cross's name?

No, you spoke ardently, in paper rhymes —
and sent some kroner to the "Christian Times".

(Pause. Falk seems about to answer, but checks himself and walks into the garden.)

Svanhild (observes him for a moment, draws closer and gently asks:)

Falk, are you cross?

Falk Of course not, just depressed, —
that's all.

Svanhild (sympathetically) You have two natures, — you're possessed, —
by different personalities — —

Falk I know.

Svanhild (vehemently) But why?

Falk (erupting) But why? Because I, well, detest 500
parading round here with my soul on show,
displaying my emotions like the rest, —
parading round with my affections bare
as girls with naked arms invite a stare!
You were the only one, — you, Svanhild, you, —
or so I thought, — but now that's over too —

(turns to her as she goes towards the summer-house and stands watching)

You're listening — ?

Svanhild To another voice that's speaking,
sssh! Listen! As the evening sun is seeking
its bed, a little bird flies here to rest, —
look *there*, — it's come here from its leafy nest — . 510
Do you know what I think? That in the end
each girl denied the gift of song is due
to get from God a little bird as friend —
meant for *that* girl, and for *her* garden too.

Falk (picks up a stone)

That means the bird and owner meet and match,
or the song's lost on some strange garden-patch —

Svanhild That's true; I've found my bird, though. For my part
I have no gift for words, no voice for singing;

but when a birdie sets the greenwood ringing
then poems seem to settle in my heart — — 520
but then — they never stay — they fly, each one —
(Falk hurls the stone; Svanhild utters a shriek)
O God, you've killed it! Look what you have done!
(dashes out to the right and soon returns)
O that was wicked, wicked!

Falk Just an eye
for an eye, Svanhild, no more, tooth for a tooth! *
You'll get no greeting now from up on high,
and no more gifts from song-land, that's the truth.
See, that's revenge on you for your great wrong!

Svanhild My wrong?
Falk Yes, yours. Until this very hour
a bird sang in *my* breast, so blithe and strong.
Look, now the bells can toll there in the tower 530
for both — you killed it.

Svanhild Did I?
Falk Killed it when
you felled my brave young hopes into the dust — *(scornfully)*
when you became *engaged*.

Svanhild But tell me then — !
Falk O things will work themselves out as they must;
he'll finish his exams, he'll get a parish —
of course go to America, as priest —

Svanhild (in the same tone)
Inherit a fat sum, all his to lavish; —
yes, for it's Lind you're meaning?

Falk Well, at least,
you ought to know —

Svanhild (suppressing a smile) As sister of the bride
I ought to —

Falk O my God! Not you — — !
Svanhild Who vied 540
to reap such luck? Not I, unfortunately!

Falk (with almost childish glee)
It's not you then? Praise be to God — but o,
He is so kind, works so compassionately!
I shall not see you as another's bride; —
He only meant my pain should bring me light — —
o hear me Svanhild, — *(tries to take her hand)*

Svanhild (hastily points towards the background)
Look who's here — good night!
(she goes towards the house. From the background arrive Mrs Halm, Anna, Miss Skjære, Guldstad, Styver and Lind. During the previous scene the sun has set; twilight over the landscape.)
Mrs Halm (to Svanhild) We'll have the priest here soon, he won't be long.
What kept you all this time?
Miss Skjære (after a quick glance at Falk)
Is something wrong?

Svanhild A touch of headache; it'll soon be gone.
Mrs Halm And yet you go bare-headed, nothing on. 550
Now, get tea ready; mustn't let things slip;
all must be neat, I know her ladyship.
(*Svanhild enters the house*)
Styver (to Falk) D'you know the pastor's politics, if he's —
Falk I doubt that he would vote for subsidies.
Styver But then, suppose that he were tipped the wink
about the verses in my desk, d'you think — ?
Falk That just might help.
Styver I hope so, — I declare
we're hard-pressed, setting up a home's expensive.
The pangs of love, their cost is quite extensive.
Falk Your fault; why place yourself dans cet galère? * 560
Styver Is love a galley?
Falk No, but *marriage* is,
with fetters, chains, loss of one's liberties.
Styver (as he sees Miss Skjære approaching)
You cannot know the riches that can dwell
in woman's thoughts and in her words as well.
Miss Skjære (quietly)
Will Guldstad act, d'you think, as guarantor?
Styver (crossly) I'll have to probe — I've not had time before.
(*they go off deep in conversation*)
Lind (quietly to Falk, as he approaches with Anna)
I can't contain myself — I really must
announce the news —
Falk It's best kept dark, d'you hear?
Then busy-bodies cannot interfere
in your affairs —
Lind No, that would be unjust; — 570
what, you, my fellow-lodger, not be told
of the young bliss that sets me in a whirl?
No, now my head is crowned, I'm crowned with *gold* —
Falk Would you prefer to have your hair, then, curl?
Well, my dear friend, if that is your position,
then go ahead, announce, it's your decision!
Lind Besides, I've thought of other reasons too,
amongst them one that carries special weight;
say, for example, someone came to woo,
to claim her, craftily, get intimate; 580
suppose his suit seemed patently successful,
I'd take it hard, I'd find it quite distressful.
Falk Yes, true; it slipped my mind, I quite forgot;
you had a *higher* calling, did you not?
At present you're in love's novitiate;
you're sure to be promoted one fine day;
but it would be absurd, precipitate,
were you to be ordained *now*, straight away.

Lind So long as the tycoon —
Falk That Guldstad man?
Anna (bashfully) O, it's just something Lind's imagining. 590
Lind Don't say that; I suspect he's threatening
my happiness by any means he can.
That fellow's quite a daily guest out here,
he's rich, unmarried, follows you about;
in short, there are a thousand things, my dear,
that make me — I can't help it — full of doubt.
Anna (with a sigh)
O, what shame; it seemed a lovely day.
Falk (sympathising with Lind)
Don't spoil your happiness for mere suspicion;
don't fly your flag and give yourself away.
Anna O God! Miss Skjære's watching; — o, perdition! 600
(she and Lind separate in different directions)
Falk (follows Lind with his eyes)
He's marching to youth's overthrow, I'd say.
Guldstad (who has meanwhile been standing by the step in conversation with Mrs Halm, approaches and slaps him on the shoulder)
Well, brooding on some poetry, eh?, what?
Falk No, on a play.
Guldstad A play? The deuce you are; —
I didn't think they were your line.
Falk They're not.
Besides, this one is by a friend; so far
I've just collaborated, made a pair; —
a brilliant writer, that I do declare.
Imagine, between lunch and supper he
will polish off an idyll right on cue.
Guldstad (politely) And the dénouement's happy?
Falk Blissfully. 610
The curtain falls — on him and her — part one.
But that's the trilogy's mere first stage done;
then comes the hard bit, writing up part two:
the engagement comedy, when she's been won,
takes five long acts to deal with, don't you see,
and out of them the thread has to be spun
for the marriage drama that concludes part three.
Guldstad (smiling) It makes me think the urge to write's contagious.
Falk Why's that?
Guldstad I mean — it may seem quite outrageous —
I too have got a play I've contemplated — *(confidentially)* 620
something that's factual, nothing complicated.
Falk And who's the hero — if that's not a bore?
Guldstad I'll tell you in the morning, — not before.
Falk It is yourself!
Guldstad D'you think I would be suited?
Falk A better hero couldn't be recruited.
But now, the heroine! Of course a wench

from healthy country parts, not urban stench?
Guldstad (shaking an admonishing finger)
 Ssh — that's the nub — for that you'll have to wait! —
(changes his tone)
 But tell me what you think of young Miss Halm?
Falk O, you are more acquainted with her charm; 630
 my judgement can't exalt her or deflate. — *(smiling)*
 Be careful though, that nothing goes astray
 with that new piece you claim is on the way.
 Suppose I broke the trust that you're extending;
 completely altered both the plot and ending?
Guldstad (good humouredly) I'd have to say amen, and stop contending.
Falk Your word on that?
Guldstad You're one of the elect;
 it would be daft if your advice were wrecked
 by a mere amateur in this respect. *(withdraws to the background)*
Falk (to Lind in passing)
 Yes, you were right. The businessman is set 640
 on murdering your budding happiness. *(moves away)*
Lind (quietly to Anna)
 You see, I was quite justified to fret;
 we'll have to break the news now, nonetheless.
(they approach Mrs Halm, who is standing with Miss Skjære by the step)
Guldstad (chatting with Styver)
 A lovely evening.
Styver I suppose it is,
 if one is in the mood —
Guldstad (jocularly) Something amiss?
 Your love-life maybe?
Styver No, at least not quite —
Falk (who has approached)
 With your engagement though?
Styver You could be right.
Falk Hurrah! then you're not wholly out, are you,
 of poetry's small change, as I can tell.
Styver (offended) I cannot think what poetry's to do 650
 with me, and my engagement too, as well.
Falk You mustn't think; if love should ever try
 to probe into its essence, it would die.
Guldstad (to Styver) But if there's something to be put to rights,
 then out with it.
Styver Yes, all day long I've puzzled
 how best to bring the matter up, unmuzzled,
 but haven't a conclusion in my sights.
Falk I'll help you and I'll keep it very short:
 since your promotion to be the intended,
 you've felt hemmed in and, so to speak, offended. 660
Styver Yes, it's been pretty hard at times, I've thought.
Falk (continuing) Felt loaded down with lots of obligations
 that you have no idea how you can meet;

look, that's the case.

Styver What's your insinuation?
I've paid my debts on time, I'm not a cheat;
(*addressing Guldstad*)
but there'll be more demands next month, I'm certain;
when one gets married, then one has a wife —

Falk (gaily) Now youth's blue heaven draws aside its curtain,
that was an echo from your blithe young life!
It will be so, I understand your fears;
all *you* need now is wings, and then some shears! 670

Styver Some shears?

Falk Yes, will's shears, shears that can cut through
each bond that binds, thus liberating you
to fly away —

Styver (angry) What do you take me for!
Implying that *I'd* break the civil law!
Do you imagine *I* would cut and run?
You're trying to defame me as someone —
it's verbal slander!

Falk Have you lost your wits?
What do you mean by that? Explain why it's —

Guldstad (laughing, to Styver)
It's up to you to clarify, so what 680
is this about?

Styver (pulls himself together) A bank loan that I've got.

Falk A loan!

Styver (hastily, to Guldstad) Some hundred daler, quite a stack,
against a guarantee to pay it back.

Miss Skjære (who has been standing with Mrs Halm, Lind and Anna)
My word! Congratulations! Heavens, how splendid!

Guldstad What's all this then? (*joins the ladies*)

Styver It's not what I intended.

Falk (enthusiastically throwing an arm around his shoulders)
Hurrah! the trumpet sounds with dulcet blast
that you've joined Cupid's listed men at last!
(*drags him across to the others*)

Miss Skjære (overwhelmed with emotion, to the men)
Just fancy, Lind and Anna — she's said yes!
Now they're engaged!

Mrs Halm And that means eight, no less,
who've found a husband from this house of mine; — (*to Falk*) 690
seven nieces — all with lodgers for their mate — —
(*she is overcome and holds a handkerchief to her eyes*)

Miss Skjære (to Anna) What crowds will come here to congratulate!
(*hugs her, overcome with emotion*)

Lind (grasping Falk's hands)
My friend, I feel I'm drunk, it's quite divine!

Falk Sssh — as a plighted man you've joined the ranks
of bliss's temperance party, don't forget;
stick to the rules, no orgies here, no thanks!

(*turns to Guldstad with an expression of mischievous sympathy*)
 Well, Mr Guldstad!

Guldstad I'm prepared to bet
 those two will make a very happy pair.

Falk (with a look of some surprise)
 You bear your sorrow with a stoic air.
 I'm glad.

Guldstad What is it, sir, you're intimating? 700

Falk That in the light of what you're contemplating,
 of *your* hopes that you —

Guldstad Well? My hopes, you say?

Falk Yes, or at least you seemed well on the way;
 you asked about Miss Halm; you stood there, drew
 me out on her —

Guldstad (smiling) Well yes — but aren't there two?

Falk The *other* one, the *sister* then you mean?

Guldstad The *other* one, the *sister* — to the letter.
 You get to know that sister somewhat better,
 and then judge for yourself if she's not been
 endowed to make her mark at something more 710
 demanding than a housemaid's daily chore.

Falk (coldly) She's every quality one can revere.

Guldstad Not every one — no social graces, charm,
 those she is somewhat lacking in I fear.

Falk A flaw, yes.

Guldstad But if only Mrs Halm
 took her in hand one winter — I would bet
 she'd yield to none.

Falk No, carry off the palm.

Guldstad (laughing) Yes, girls are funny creatures, true, and yet — !

Falk (gaily) They look like winter rye-grass as they grow;
 they peek unnoticed through the frost and snow. 720

Guldstad At Christmas, in the ballroom, they come out —

Falk Well fed, on gossip, scandal, to be sure —

Guldstad And when the warm spring weather comes —

Falk They sprout
 green shoots, young ladies but in miniature!

Lind (steps over and shakes Falk by the hand)
 How sensible I've been, can't tell you how
 delighted with my luck, secure position!

Guldstad There's the fiancé for you; tell us how
 a man enjoys his nearly-wed condition.

Lind (rattled) That's private, not a subject I'd allow —

Guldstad (playfully) Bad tempered, eh? I shall complain to Anna. 730
 (*joins the ladies*)

Lind (following him with his eyes)
 How can one bear that man's unpleasant manner!

Falk But you were wrong about him.

Lind O? I find —

Falk It wasn't Anna that he had in mind.

Lind What? Was it Svanhild?
Falk *That I couldn't say.*
(with a whimsical expression)
 Forgive me, martyr in another's stead!
Lind What do you mean?
Falk Now tell me, have you read
 the dailies?
Lind No.
Falk I'll send you one today;
 an item on a chap whose fate it was
 to have his eye-tooth pulled, still sound, because
 a cousin had the toothache, but not he. 740
Miss Skjære (looking off left)
 Here come the pastor!
Mrs Halm Such virility!
Styver Five, six, seven, eight young children —
Falk Mostly recent.
Miss Skjære Ugh, one could well describe it as indecent!
(in the meantime a carriage has been heard coming to a halt off left.
The pastor, his wife and eight children, all in travelling clothes, come
on one by one.)
Mrs Halm (hastens to greet them)
 How nice to see you — welcome!
Strawman Very kind!
Mrs Strawman But you have visitors —
Mrs Halm O never mind!
Mrs Strawman If we're a nuisance, please, —
Mrs Halm I promise you,
 not in the slightest, you've come right on cue!
 My daughter Anna's got engaged — well, just.
Strawman (takes Anna's hand with unction)
 Let me bear witness; that affection, love,
 is such a treasure as nor moth nor rust * 750
 corrupt, given something over and above.
Mrs Halm How good of you to bring the children here
 to town with you, though.
Strawman We've left four behind,
 besides the ones we've brought with us.
Mrs Halm O dear!
Strawman Yes, three of them are still too young to mind
 the loss of a loving father's presence, owing
 to the parliamentary session —
Miss Skjære (to Mrs Halm, as she takes her leave)
 Must be going.
Mrs Halm But why go quite so early, stay my dear!
Miss Skjære I must go spread the news in town, must fly; —
 the Jensens go to bed quite late I know;
 the aunts will be delighted, ever so. 760
 Anna, my sweet, you must stop being shy.
 Tomorrow's Sunday; you'll face inundations

is to be independent, staunch and free.
 A task that will not daunt us, you and me.
 A fervent spirit's pounding in your veins,
 you've warm, warm words to voice your dedication.
 You won't endure convention's servile hire
 imposing on your heart, it must beat free;
 you do not have a voice that's meant to be
 obedient, blending with the common choir. 810

Svanhild And do you think I haven't felt the pains
 that cloud my vision, clamp my heart in chains?
Falk I longed to blaze my *own* path, choose *my* way — —
Svanhild Yes, in your private thoughts?
 No, action, deed.
 But then the aunts brought good advice to heed, —
 they wanted to discuss, explore, and weigh — — (*drawing closer*)
 my private thoughts, you said; no, I proceeded
 on one bold venture — I'd become a painter.

Falk What then?
Svanhild It failed, I lacked the talent needed;
 but lust for liberty grew none the fainter; 820
 after the studio the stage invited.

Falk And that scheme, too, was certain to be blighted?
Svanhild Yes, thanks to what the oldest aunt maintained;
 a post as governess should be obtained — —
Falk But no-one's ever told me about this!
Svanhild Of course, on purpose — ignorance is bliss.
 (*with a smile*)
 They feared my "future prospects" might be harmed
 if young men got to know and were alarmed.

Falk (*gazes at her for a while thoughtfully and sympathetically*)
 I've often felt you'd met with some such fate, —
 I well recall the first time that I saw you, 830
 how little you and others would relate,
 and how not one could fathom you, explore you.
 Around the board a well-dressed gathering sat,
 the tea smelt nice, — the talk droned on, subdued,
 the ladies coloured while the men-folk cooed
 like tame doves — on a sultry day at that!
 Religious matters and morality
 discussed by matrons and maturer mothers,
 and young wives lauded domesticity,
 while you perched there, apart from all the others. 840
 And when the tea-time chatter started swirling
 into a verbal Bacchanalian caper, —
 there you shone, silver-bright as hall-marked sterling,
 amongst forged coins and counterfeited paper.
 You were the coinage of another country,
 were valued here at quite a different rate,
 scarce valid in a glib and smart debate
 on poetry, art, butter, all and sundry.

Then, as Miss Skjære, bless her, had her say —
Svanhild (with a straight face)
 Her swain behind her, like some warrior bold, 850
 his hat borne shield-wise for his arm to hold —
Falk
 Your mother nodded, seated by the tray:
 “Drink Svanhild, drink, before the tea gets cold.”
 And drink you did, that luke-warm, horrid brew,
 like all the others, old and young ones too.
 The name, though, made me think of that past age;
 the savage Volsung saga’s griefs, its rage,
 with its long line of forebears overthrown,
 it seemed to span from their times to our own;
 I saw you as a Svanhild in new guise, 860
 adapted to our current modern manners.
 War’s been too long waged under specious banners,
 the army now wants peace and compromise;
 but if law’s scorned, the sin of this our time,
 then blood that’s innocent must purge the crime.

Svanhild (with mild irony)
 I never thought a simple brew of tea
 could breed such thoughts, couched so blood-curdlingly;
 but it’s of course the least part of your skill,
 to hear soul’s voice even when its voice is still.
Falk
 No, don’t laugh, Svanhild, please; I see a tear 870
 that shines behind your jesting — see it clear.
 See something more; should you be crushed to make
 mere dust, be trodden into formless clay,
 then every jack-of-all-trades will essay
 with crude, blunt modelling-knife, to cheat and fake.
 The world will plagiarise you, God’s own creature,
 re-shape you, use *its* image as the norm;
 will change you, add and alter every feature.
 And when you’re pedestalled in *such* a form,
 it will rejoice: “Look, normal after all! 880
 Such cool plasticity — marmoreal!
 And top-lit by the lamp and chandelier
 she goes so nicely with the décor here!”
(grasps her hand ardently)
 But if you’re doomed to spiritual death, be sage!
 Live first! Be *mine* in God’s blithe spring, be *mine*;
 you’ll enter soon enough the gilded cage.
 Fine dames may thrive there, a true woman pine,
 and I love you the woman, not the dame.
 Let others have you when the home lays claim;
 it’s *here*, though, that my life’s spring first took root, — 890
 it’s here my tree of song began to shoot,
 it’s here I’ve grown my wings, become — I know it
 if you don’t fail me, Svanhild — a true poet!

Svanhild (gently reproachful, withdrawing her hand)
 O why make me, just now, this protestation?

It was so sweet, our meeting casually.
 Why couldn't you keep silent? Must it be
 that happiness requires a declaration?
 Now all that's over, now that you have spoken.

Falk No, I have set the mark, now you must clear it,
 my doughty Svanhild — that's unless you fear it. 900
 Dare to choose freedom, if your will's unbroken.

Svanhild Choose freedom?

Falk Yes, there's freedom, obviously,
 in answering unreservedly will's call;
 and *you* were sent by heaven, it's plain to see,
 to save me from aestheticism's thrall.
 I'm like the bird from which I take my name,
 must fight *against* the wind, must soar on high;
 that is the buffeting I've learnt to tame;
 it was from *you* that I drew strength to fly.
 Be mine, be mine, until the world encroaches, — 910
 when ways must part, when autumn-tide approaches.
 Make *your* soul's riches echo forth in mine
 and poem upon poem I'll repay you;
 then you can age beneath the lamps that shine,
 a tree turned golden, nothing shall dismay you.

Svanhild (with suppressed bitterness)
 I can't accept your kind prognostication,
 though clearly it's meant kindly, in a way.
 You see me as a child sees its creation,
 a flute cut from a reed, to last a day.

Falk That's better though than standing in a bog, 920
 till autumn drowns it in a murky fog. (*vehemently*)
 You *must*! You *shall*! It is your duty, yes,
 to share with me God's wonderful largesse.
 I'll make your merest dream sheer poetry!
 That bird there — that I killed unwittingly;
 it was your song of songs, your psaltery.
 Don't fail me; sing for *me* the bird's sweet lays, —
 my life shall be a poem that repays!

Svanhild And when you've fathomed me and I'm drained dry,
 when I have sung my last song from the bough, — 930
 what then?

Falk (gazes at her)
 What then? Come, you remember; why —
 (*points out into the garden*)

Svanhild (softly) You're good with stones — yes, I remember now.

Falk (laughs scornfully)
 So *that's* your vaunted spirit, fine and free, —
 that takes risks only when the risk pays off. (*vehemently*)
 I showed the goal for you. Reply — don't scoff —
 with an eternal vow.

Svanhild You've answered me:
 I'll never join you where your path will take you.

Falk (abrupt and cold)

Enough; the world can have you, I forsake you.

(Svanhild has turned away from him in silence. She places her hands on the verandah paling and rests her head on them.)

Falk (paces back and forth a few times, takes out a cigar, halts beside her and after a glance says):

No doubt you've found all this ridiculous,
this evening entertainment I've provided. 940

(pauses as though expecting an answer. Svanhild remains silent)

I quite forgot myself, I have decided;

your family loyalty's meticulous; —

I'll speak with kid gloves on now, for the rest,

that way we'll understand each other best.

(pauses a moment; but as Svanhild remains motionless,

he turns away and moves right)

Svanhild (raises her head after a brief silence, looks at him steadily and approaches)

Now I shall speak to you, and speak sincerely

to thank you kindly for your helping hand.

You used an image that awoke me, clearly

explaining your "fly, soar above the land".

You were, you said, a falcon that must tower

aloft, *against* the winds that buffet you; 950

I was the gust to launch you in the blue, —

without *me* you would lack the strength and power. —

How pitiful! And all in all, how tame —

yes, laughable, as you at last suspected!

That image fell on good soil, all the same;

within my mind another was injected

that doesn't limp as yours does, halt and lame.

I saw you not as falcon but a kite,

a paper kite made out of poetry

that of itself was triviality, 960

it was the kite-string that controlled the flight.

The fabric seemed inscribed in letters bold

with promises poetic writ in gold;

each panel was adorned with epigrams

that flapped and fluttered aimlessly, all shams;

the long tail was composed of modern verse

that seemed designed to scourge our modern failings

but somehow managing, for all its flailings,

the merest whispered censures, nothing worse.

You knelt before me powerless, not strong; 970

you begged "Please make me fly somehow or other!"

O let me soar aloft on wingèd song,

though it upset your sister and your mother!"

Falk (wrings his hands in great agitation)

But heavens above, by God —

Svanhild

No, take my word,

I find such childish games just too absurd;

but you, who were for some great mission bred, —

you're satisfied to drift upon the breeze,
let your vocation dangle on a thread,
which I can sever when and how I please.

Falk (briskly) What day is it today?

Svanhild (more gently) The right reply!

980

Let this day be a turning point and train you
to let *your* wings decide how far they'll fly,
no matter if they break or they sustain you.
It's desk-work, is mere paper poetry,
and life's concerned with living; that alone
gives access to a higher, loftier zone;
but choose now, of the two, which shall it be? (*draws closer*)
Well, *I've* done what you asked me: sung my own,
my final song while perching on the bough; —
it *was* my only one; I'm empty now; —
now, if you want to, you can cast your stone!

990

(*she enters the house. Falk remains motionless, gazing after her; far out on the water a boat can be glimpsed from which can be heard the distant and muted song that follows:*)

Chorus I'm spreading my pinions, hoist sail with glee,
sweep like an eagle life's mirror, the sea;
leave flocks of seagulls trailing.
Away with dull ballast and let it be drowned!
It could be I'm running my boat aground;
but it's *still* a delight to be sailing!

Falk (jolted out of his reverie)

What? Singing? Yes, of course — it's Lind's quartet;
rehearsing glee-songs! Yes, that's it, I bet!

(*to Guldstad, who comes out carrying a light overcoat*)

Guldstad Why Mr Guldstad, — sneaking off? But please —
I'm off. But let me first put on my coat;
we unpoetic folk can't stand a breeze,
we find the evening air affects the throat.
Good night!

1000

Falk But Mr Guldstad — if you'd spare —
a word. Set me a task, some *great* affair — !
Involving me in life — !

Guldstad (with ironic emphasis) Try living — life
involves, as you will find, war to the knife.

Falk (looks at him thoughtfully and says slowly):

Yes, that's the programme in a nutshell, yes. (*with animation*)
Now I have woken from my drowsiness,
the die is cast, life's gamble now proceeds,
and you shall see — the devil take me —

1010

Guldstad Fie,
no need to swear; that wouldn't harm a fly.

Falk Not words, you're right, but deeds and only deeds!
I shall reverse the Lord's strict working scheme; —
six week-days wasted on mere idle shirking;
my own creation still an empty dream; —

tomorrow, Sunday — heigh, I shall get working!

Guldstad (laughing)

Yes, let me see you strive with all your might;
but go in now and lie down first. Good night!

(goes off left. Svanhild appears in the room above the verandah, closes the window and pulls down the blind)

Falk No, time for action; I have been benighted.

1020

(looks up at Svanhild's window and bursts out as though seized with a firm resolution.)

Good night! Good night! And dream sweet dreams tonight;
tomorrow, Svanhild, we two shall be plighted.

(he hurries off right; across the water the sound of:)

Chorus

It could be you're running your boat aground;
but it's still a delight to be sailing!

(the boat glides slowly into the distance as the curtain falls)

ACT II

(Sunday afternoon. Ladies and gentlemen, dressed in their best, are drinking coffee on the verandah. Through the open French window several guests can be seen in the garden room, from where can be heard the following song):

Chorus A welcome to this, our engagement do!
 Now you're licensed to woo and not hurry,
 now you can hug as it pleases you,
 now you can kiss and canoodle too; —
 no-one will eavesdrop, don't worry.

 Now you can bask in romance's glow;
 you're free to, you're going steady.
 Now you can set up house, you know;
 keep love well-watered and let it grow;
 demonstrate, please, that you're ready.

10

Miss Skjære (inside the room)

 To think you didn't tell me, Lind, you hid —
 I should be cross!

A lady (simultaneously) Behaving in that manner!

Another (in the doorway, to Anna)

 He wrote though, I assume?

Aunt

No.

Miss Skjære

My man did.

A lady (on the verandah)

 How long has this been kept a secret, Anna? *(runs into the room)*

Miss Skjære Tomorrow you must go and buy a ring.

Several ladies We'll measure him!

Miss Skjære You will do no such thing;
 she'll do that for herself.

Mrs Strawman (on the verandah to a lady who is knitting)

 Is that back-stitch?

Housekeeper (in the doorway with a tray)

 Another cup of coffee?

A lady Thanks — a spot.

Miss Skjære How nice — you'll wear the cloak — the new one which
 you bought last week for visits, will you not?

20

An elderly lady (in the room by the window)

 When are we going shopping then, we women?

Mrs Strawman

 What are they charging nowadays for linen?

A gentleman (to a lady on the verandah)

 Just look at Mr Lind, with Anna's glove.

One of the ladies (with squeals of delight)

 My word, he's kissing it!

Others (likewise, leaping to their feet) What! Heavens above!

Lind (appears in the doorway, red and embarrassed)

What rubbish! *(he withdraws)*

Miss Skjære Yes he did, I saw it clearly.

Styver (in the doorway with a cup of coffee in one hand and a biscuit in the other)

One shouldn't treat the facts so cavalierly;

I would submit the witness got it wrong.

Miss Skjære (out of sight inside)

Come Anna: by the mirror, come along!

Some ladies (calling) You too Lind!

Miss Skjære Back to back! Now don't be shy!

Ladies on the verandah

And then we'll see how much he's taller by! 30

(they all run into the garden room; laughter and loud conversation can be heard for a while inside)

Falk (who has during the previous scene been strolling in the garden, now comes forward, stops and looks in until the noise subsides somewhat).

They're butchering a young love's poesy. —

That oaf, who killed a cow and botched the slaughter
so that it died in needless agony,

was sentenced to ten days on bread and water; —

but these — these here — they all get off scot free. *(clenches his fists)*

If only —; hush, words are a mere distraction;

from now on I'll devote myself to action.

Lind (slips out through the door in a hurry)

Thank God for that, they're talking about fashion;
now I can slip —

Falk Heigh, *you're* in luck; a swarm
of fond good wishes, far more than your ration, 40
have buzzed here all day long, sincere and warm.

Lind They mean so well, the lot of them; although
a little less would have sufficed, you know,
it's quite exhausting is their contribution;
a moment for oneself, that's the solution. *(makes to go off right)*

Falk Where are you off to?

Lind To the attic — but
knock on the door if you should find it shut.

Falk But don't you want me to bring Anna too!

Lind No, — she can send a message, that will do.
Last night we had a long talk, never-ending. 50
I said most things I needed to express,
besides it seems wrong to be over-spending
what ought to be one's store of happiness.

Falk You're right of course; one shouldn't draw too much
for running costs —

Lind Hush, look, I have to go.
I'll spoil myself — a pipe perhaps — it's such
a while since last I smoked, three days or so.
My blood's been in such turmoil it's confused me,
I trembled, thinking, what if she refused me.

Falk Yes, what you need is some sort of distraction. 60

God knows, for such a man, no need at all! (*to the ladies*)
Come ladies! (*takes Anna by the arm*)

No, you wait, and pay attention; —
teach him what is expected, by convention.

(*they go off right, back stage, with several of the ladies, chattering with animation; the other guests disperse in separate groups about the garden. Falk detains Strawman, whose wife and children hover by him. Guldstad walks to and fro during the following conversation.*)

Falk Now pastor, end this young priest's battle royal —
Miss Anna will be put off him directly.

Strawman (*pompously*)
Well, women should support their man, be loyal; — — (*pensively*)
at lunch, though, if I understood correctly,
the grounds for his vocation were not clear, 100
the sacrifice involved in this rash venture —

Falk No pastor, don't be hasty with your censure.
My word, my hand upon it, I'm sincere,
his calling's strong, his motives are defensible, —

Strawman (*his face clears*)
Yes, — if he's sure of something *quite* dependable
by way of income — *that's* a different case.

Falk (*impatiently*)
You emphasise what I'd rate common-place;
I mean his *call* — *conviction*, not his *wages*.

Strawman (*with a sympathetic smile*)
Without a salary no-one engages
to serve in Europe, Asia, USA, — 110
or elsewhere, though, of course, were he *available*,
still *single*, my young friend, and *free*, I'd say
that's fine, just go ahead, no problem there;
for Lind, though, who's engaged, the whole affair
becomes impossible, and he's assailable!
You work it out — he is quite normal, and
in time he'll want to have a family, —
he'll have the best intentions, I agree,
but *means*, my friend —? "Build not upon the sand" *
the scripture says. It's quite another thing 120
if the offering — —

Falk Yes, that counts substantially
as well I know.

Strawman You see, *that's* comforting!
If the *offering* involved is quite financially *
considerable —

Falk He'll gladly pay the cost.

Strawman He? How am I to take you? — I am lost!
He will *receive* the offering, is that clear? —
Not *make* it —

Mrs Strawman (*appearing in the background*)
They're still at it, they're still here.

Falk (stares at him for a moment in amazement, suddenly comprehends and bursts out laughing)
Hurrah for offerings; yes, notes by the wad
brought on at festivals in praise of God!

Strawman If one's hard up for money as a rule, 130
one gets it back at Easter and at Yule.

Falk (gaily) "The call" is heard — provided it's well paid, —
even by the family man, however staid!

Strawman Of course; if one's assured of something sizeable
then mission-work with kaffirs is advisable. (*lowers his voice*)
I'll calm her down, and try to soothe her ire.
(*to one of the children*)
Here, little Mattie, fetch me out my briar.
The briar pipe I mean, you understand me —
(*fumbling in his coat pocket*)
no, wait a moment; — here, I've got it handy.
(*goes off, filling his pipe, followed by wife and children*)

Guldstad (approaching)
You play the serpent, then, so that's your part 140
in young love's Eden, or so I surmise.

Falk The tree of knowledge bears green fruit that's tart;
tempts no-one. (*to Lind who enters right*)
Why it's you — what a surprise!

Lind May God preserve us, what a frightful state
our room is in; the curtain torn, lamp broken,
our pen-nibs are all snapped, the stove's top-plate
has ink all over it, and in the grate —

Falk (claps him on the shoulder)
That vandalism is my new life's token.
I've sat behind the curtain far too long
composing verse beneath the dim lamp-light; 150
it's over now, my lifeless closet-song;
I'll walk abroad in God's sun, where it's bright; —
my spring's arrived, my spirit's transformation; —
now actions, deeds shall be my aspiration.

Lind Make verses out of what you like; but don't
expect my ma-in-law — it's not her wont —
to deal with curtains ripped in several places.

Falk What? She who spoils her lodgers, generous
with nieces, daughters, — do you really think
she'd jib at that small task, pull sour faces! 160

Lind (angry) It's nasty, low, the depth to which you sink,
yes, for it compromises both of us!
You settle it between you; but the lamp —
glass, globe and base — that was *my* property —

Falk Rot, — that won't weigh a scruple, not with me;
you've got the summer, marked with God's clear stamp, —
what do you need the lamp for?

Lind You are crazy;
you quite forget that summer-time is short.

If I'm to cram for Christmas, I'd have thought
I can't afford to waste time being lazy. 170

Falk (wide eyed)
You're thinking of the future?

Lind True enough;
I fancy the exam will be quite tough —

Falk But last night, don't forget, you plumped for *living*;
rapt in the present, claimed, with emphasis,
you'd risk a middling pass at Christmas, giving
as your excuse you'd snared the bird of bliss;
you had the feeling that you stood replete,
with the world's riches spread before your feet!

Lind I said so, yes, but you must understand
one takes such things *cum grano salis* —

Falk And — ? 180

Lind This morning I'll indulge my happiness,
on that I'm quite decided.

Falk So you're set!

Lind I've got to visit in-laws I've not met,
so there goes some time wasted anyway;
but further interruptions, I must say,
would wreck my schedule, make a thorough mess.

Falk You planned last week, though, you'd be on the loose,
a lengthy walking-tour in praise of song.

Lind Yes, but I thought the tour would take too long; 190
the fortnight could be put to better use.

Falk No, *you* stayed here on quite another ground;
you said to the effect that you had found
the dale, for air and bird-song, matched the fell!

Lind Yes, true enough — the climate here's quite sound;
but one can share these pleasures just as well
while working at one's books industriously.

Falk But *books* were just what couldn't serve to be
your Jacob's ladder —

Lind O, you're obstinate:
one talks like that when *free* and *celibate*. 200

Falk (stares at him folding his hands in quiet astonishment)
Et tu, Brute!

Lind (looking somewhat embarrassed and irritated)
But we two, bear in mind,
have obligations different in kind.
I've my fiancée. Ask the others yonder
who've been engaged a long time, many seasons,
they'd give you serious grounds, I hope, to ponder, —
they'd all maintain that when pairs choose to wander
through life together, then —

Falk Spare me your reasons.

Whom do you instance?

Lind Styver, for example;
now there's an honest man, a splendid sample.

Miss Skjære, too, who is so wise and wary,
she says — 210

Falk What of the pastor, though, his Mary?
Lind Yes, they're a funny couple, it's quite true;
a quiet placidness enshrouds those two —
imagine, her engagement's slipped her mind,
and being in love once — all that's gone as well.

Falk Yes, that's what sleep does for you, as you'll find, —
the birds of memory, well, they rebel.
(*places his hands on his shoulder and looks at him ironically*)
You, my dear Lind, — did you sleep well last night?

Lind I went to bed dog-tired; slept a mite
but at the same time tossed and turned, uneasy. 220
I almost felt that I had gone quite mad.

Falk Ah yes, — some spell, *that* must have made you queasy.
Lind Thank God, though, woke up feeling not too bad.

(*During this scene Strawman has, from time to time, strolled across the background engaged in conversation with Anna; Mrs Strawman and the children trail behind. Miss Skjære also appears, along with a number of other ladies.*)
Miss Skjære (before she enters) O, Mr Lind!
Lind They're after me again!
Come, let us go!

Miss Skjære Where are you off to then?
Let's settle, now, this terrible division
that's opened up between the groom and bride.

Lind Are we divided?
Miss Skjære (pointing to Anna, who is standing a little way off in the garden)
That you must decide —
that tearful look of hers denotes the mission
way out there in America.

Lind God knows, 230
she was so willing —

Miss Skjære (sarcastically) Yes, I'm sure it shows!
No, friend, you'll reach a different conclusion
when the matter's been more quietly discussed.

Lind But fighting for the faith, why, that was just
what I most fondly dreamt of!

Miss Skjære Who'd put trust,
in our enlightened age, on dream, illusion?
Look, Styver had a dream the other night —
a letter came, adorned with seals of wax —

Mrs Strawman A dream like that means *cash*, the future's bright.
Miss Skjære (nodding) Yes, he was sued next day — arrears of tax. 240
(*the ladies form a circle around Lind and walk up the garden with him, chatting together.*)
Strawman (monopolising Anna, who does her best to break away.)
It's on such grounds, my dear young child, as these,
it's on such grounds, based on deliberation,
morality, in part, yes, revelation,

that you will see it's sheer imagination,
this change of mind that's causing you unease.

Anna (half crying)

Yes, God, — I'm inexperienced, so unwary — —

Strawman

And it's so natural that one should be chary,
afraid of danger when it isn't necessary;
but don't let doubt ensnare you, face it squarely,
be steadfast; see yourself in me and Mary.

250

Mrs Strawman Yes, I've just heard this morning, from your mother,
that I was as depressed as you are, dear,
when *we* received the call —

Strawman

The reason's clear:
she'd have to leave the city altogether; —
but when we'd got some cash somehow or other,
and when we'd had the first twins, why, the weather
improved, blew over.

Falk (quietly to Strawman)

Bravo! Hit the heights
your speech did!

Strawman (nods to him and turns to Anna again.)

Keep your word! — you should by rights.
Should one throw in one's hand? Falk's been explaining
the mission's not so poor, it's self-maintaining —
was that not so?

260

Falk

No, pastor —

Strawman

Yes, by God! (*to Anna*)
If something good can't come of this, it's odd.
In that case, why give up? Let's show persistence!
Survey the past, the days far in the distance!
See Adam, Eve, Noah's animals as well —
the lilies of the field — birds on the fell —
the little birds — the little birds — the fishes — —

(*continues in a low voice as he moves away with Anna.*)

Falk (as Miss Skjære and the aunts enter with Lind)

Hurrah! Fresh reinforcements, as one wishes;
the Old Guard at the ready, in full gear!

Miss Skjære

Well, what a good thing that we found you here.

270

(*lowers her voice*)

We've dealt with *him*, Falk — now *this* little dear.

(*approaches Anna*)

Strawman (with a deprecating gesture)

She has no need of worldly-wise persuasion;
redundant where the soul has done its bit;
society must — (*modestly*) *I've* tried, I admit,
as best I could — — !

Mrs Halm

Please, no elaboration.

They're reconciled then!

Aunts (moved)

God is very kind!

Strawman

Yes, can there be a soul so deaf and blind
as not to feel this scene supremely moving;
it is so very touching, so improving,

it's so inspiring when we see a nice, 280
still adolescent child, who'll sacrifice,
but willingly, her all to duty.

Mrs Halm Yes,
the family's played its part, though, none the less.

Miss Skjære The aunts and I — I'm well aware of it!
You, Lind, you have her heart's key in your pocket;
but we, her friends, we have a burglar's kit
to use should *your* key not unlock it; — (*squeezing his hand*)
and if, as years pass, there's the need, you may
still count on us — our friendship's no pretension.

Mrs Halm Yes, we'll stand by you, with you all the way — 290

Miss Skjære Protect you from the serpent of dissension.

Strawman O, love and friendship! What an awkward pair!
One moment miserable, then full of bliss! (*turns to Lind*)
But now, young man, let's settle this affair!
(*leads Anna to him*)

Here, take your bride — and give your bride a kiss!

Lind (*gives Anna his hand*) I'll stay.

Anna (*simultaneously*) I'll come with you!

Anna (*dumbfounded*) You'll stay?

Lind (*likewise*) You'll come?

Anna (*with a helpless look at the bystanders*)
My God, we're still at loggerheads somehow!

Lind Yes, what *is* this?

Ladies What now?

Miss Skjære (*eagerly*) There must be some
misunderstanding —

Strawman But she gave her vow
to go with him!

Miss Skjære And Lind swore he'd be staying! 300

Falk (*laughing*) They've yielded, both of them, what happens now?

Strawman Too difficult for me, it's quite dismaying. (*goes upstage*)

Aunts (*chattering*)
But, Lord, who was it started off this row?

Mrs Halm (*to Guldstad and Styver, who have been strolling out in the garden and
now approach*)
At odds, the lot of them, not hand in glove. (*continues talking quietly*)

Mrs Strawman (*to Miss Skjære as she notices that the table is laid*)
Now we shall have some tea.

Miss Skjære (*curtly*) Thank heavens.

Falk And now
hurrah for friendship, tea, the aunts and love!

Styver But since the problem's been defined, you see,
it can be solved now quite agreeably.
The case hangs on a section in the law
that says: a wife must cleave unto her mate. 310
The wording's clear, admitting no debate —

Miss Skjære Yes, yes; but reconcile them, that's the chore.

Strawman She must obey the edict from on high —

it heals young ladies' bosoms should they pine.
A Gentleman No, a *horse-chestnut tree*, — that is unbeatable
for stoking stoves — the fruit, though, quite uneatable.
Svanhild No, a *camellia* — to adorn the hair,
it's what the ladies at a ball would wear.
Mrs Halm No, it is like a flower, my special pet; —
wait — it is rather pale — no, violet; —
what is it called now — ? It's — now let me see — — ;
no, it is strange, my loss of memory. 360
Styver These flower-similes are very lame.
No, love is rather like a flower-*pot*:
meant to contain one plant, yet all the same
holds eight a little later, like as not.
Strawman (surrounded by the children)
No, love is like a *pear-tree*; it will show,
in spring time, pear-tree blossom white as snow;
but later on the bloom's exuberance is
transformed, creates big, green protuberances;
the parent stock provides them sustenance; —
with God's help they'll grow into pears perchance. 370
Falk So many heads, so many points of view! *
You're on the wrong track, every one of you;
each simile's adrift; now hear my views; —
you're free to twist and turn them as you choose.
(adopts an erect oratorical pose)
There is a plant grows o'er far eastern seas;
its native home, a lush, sun-warmed plantation —
Ladies Ah, it's the tea-plant!
Falk Yes.
Mrs Strawman That intonation
reminded me of Strawman's voice —
Strawman Now please,
don't put him out.
Falk It's home, the land of fable,
a thousand miles beyond the barren dune; — 380
top up my cup, Lind! Thanks. Now I'll attune
my theme to tea and love as best I'm able.
(the guests cluster round)
Its home is in the legendary land;
ah!; love, too, sets up *there* its habitation.
Only the sun's blithe off-spring understand
the plant, its nurture and its cultivation.
It is the same with love, the rule pertains.
A drop of sunlight must flow through the veins
if love is to strike root therein, assume
its greenery, thrive well and burst in bloom. 390
Miss Skjære But China is a very ancient land;
tea's age can be worked out precisely, and —
Strawman It out-dates Tyre and Jerusalem.
Falk Yes, it was famous when Methusalem, *

perched at his school-desk, thumbed his picture-book —
Miss Skjære (triumphantly) And love is by its nature young! To look
for similarities you'll need good eyes.
Falk No, love is ancient too, the same applies;
that doctrine we subscribe to with the brio
that's shown by Cape-folk too, and folk in Rio; — 400
yes, from Nepal to Brevig, northward lying,
it's said all there, too, think that love's *undying*; —
well, that may be a slight exaggeration, —
but old it is, beyond our calculation.
Miss Skjære But love is love wherever felt, I'm sure;
while tea, though sometimes good, is sometimes poor.
Mrs Strawman Yes, but we have so many kinds of teas.
Anna The earliest springtime shoots that come out first —
Svanhild They're meant to quench the sun-warmed damsels' thirst.
Young Lady They have intoxicating qualities — 410
Another Fragrant as lotus, sweet as almond drops.
Guldstad We never seem to have them in *our* shops.
Falk (who has meanwhile stepped down from the verandah)
Ah, ladies, all of us, we've all professed
a private "heavenly kingdom" in our breast. *
There, by the thousand, buds sprout happily
behind the Chinese wall of modesty.
But fancy's little Chinese moppets, sighing
as they take shelter in their bowers, vying
to dream their dreams — such dreams — veils on their hip,
clutching the golden tulip in their grip — 420
they're why you picked your crop in early spring;
you didn't think what autumn-tide might bring.
So we get stems and rubbish of that ilk, —
an aftermath that's neither hemp nor silk, —
a crop of stalks that ought to be despised —
Guldstad That is the black tea.
Falk (nods) Widely merchandised.
A Gentleman So Holberg says somewhere, about beef tea —
Miss Skjære (primly) Quite out of date for modern taste and manners.
Falk Ah, but there's beef-tea love as well, you know;
that browbeats males — as current novels show — 430
there's proof in the be-slippered infantry
advancing under matrimony's banners.
In short, a likeness where you'd least expect.
Example, an old saw one can't neglect
says tea will spoil, lose something of its flavour,
the innate quality we all respect,
if it's shipped in by sea for us to savour.
It *must* cross deserts, climb high mountain tracks,
pay Russians and the Cossacks custom tax,
get passport stamps that will allow it in 440
so we are guaranteed it's genuine.

But doesn't love pursue the self-same route
 through life's own desert? What a great commotion,
 what shrieks, what social obloquy to boot,
 if you, if I shipped love on freedom's ocean!
 "Good God, it's spoilt its moral piquancy!"
 "Completely lost its legal fragrancy!"

Strawman (rising to his feet)
 Yes, God be praised — in any decent land
 such wares are still considered contraband!

Falk Yes, for admission here, you are quite right, 450
 it *must* cross regulation's chill Siberia,
 where sea air cannot make the stuff inferior; —
 then it must show the stamp in black and white
 from verger, organist and sexton too,
 from friends, acquaintances, from God knows who,
 and other worthies, over and above
 the licence granted by the god of love. —
 And now the last great similarity;
 look how our culture's hand lies heavily
 on the far east's "celestial domains"; * 460
 it's ruined walls, its mighty power de-fanged,
 the last true mandarin of all now hanged,
 profane hands seek to harvest what remains.
 "Celestial domains" are just a fiction,
 a fable-story, widely disbelieved;
 the wonderland's a total dereliction,
 the whole world now a drabness unrelieved.
 But where is love, with such conditions rife?
 Ah, that too has departed from this life! (*raises his cup*)
 But let it go, the thing our times detest; — 470
 a toast, in tea, to Cupid — may he rest!
 (*drains the cup; the company registers shock and indignation*)

Miss Skjære That was the oddest speech, quite lamentable.
Ladies To think that love could possibly be dead — !
Strawman It's here, look, rosy-cheeked and hale, well-fed,
 in folk of every sort at this tea-table.
 We've got the widow in her mourning dress —
Miss Skjære A married couple —
Styver One whose faithfulness
 can challenge many a pledged fidelity.
Guldstad And after that lot comes love's cavalry,
 the light brigade, — those who've just pledged their troth. 480
Strawman First come the veterans, who've kept their oath
 despite the ravages of time —
Miss Skjære (butting in) *Behind them*
 the infant class — who got engaged last year.
Strawman In short, spring, summer, autumn, winter's here,
 the facts are palpable, one must so find them
 if one has eyes to see with, ears to hear.
Falk So what?

Miss Skjære *You'd show them to the door, I fear.*

Falk But ma'am, you have misunderstood me, flatly.
 For when have I denied the status quo?
 But you must bear in mind it's not exactly 490
 the case that where there's smoke there's fire, you know.
 I'm well aware that people do get bedded,
 raise families, indulge in suchlike things;
 you've not heard *me* deny the world is wedded
 to little baskets and engagement rings, *
 that blushing little billets-doux are sent
 sealed with two turtle-doves that — well, dissent,
 that bridegrooms work themselves into a state
 and wedding guests are served with chocolate,
 that use and custom have devised a code 500
 that briefs "the loved one" on what's à la mode; — —
 but good Lord, we've got majors in addition,
 we've arsenals with heavy guns in store,
 we've drums, spurs, cutlasses to requisition, —
 but what does all that mean, what is it for?
 It just means that we get some bandoleeros,
 by no means that we're well supplied with heroes.
 Yes, what if Gardermoen were crammed with tents, — *
 would that mean high morale, belligerence?

Strawman No, moderation's everything; indeed 510
 it isn't always wise, can turn out wrongly
 when young love is portrayed without due heed,
 promoted as the *only* love, too strongly.
 One shouldn't always build on that deduction;
 no, when it comes to marriage, home construction,
 love needs some solid rock for its foundation
 that will not give, ensures its preservation.

Miss Skjære Then I have quite a different way of thinking.
 I should have thought two hearts, an easy linking
 that could last just a day, but lasts for years, 520
 would, proving love authentic, calm your fears.

Anna (with warmth)
 Not so, — a bond that's young and free as well,
 holds a yet bigger nut within its shell.

Lind (thoughtfully)
 It may waft the ideal's scent forth, who knows,
 like maiden snowdrops, but beneath the snows.

Falk (suddenly breaking in)
 You fallen Adam! *That's* nostalgia wailing,
 that yearns for paradise behind the paling.

Lind What rot!

Mrs Halm (offended, to Falk, as she rises)
 It isn't kind, not in the slightest,
 to stir things up, renew hostilities;
 don't worry, your friend's joy shines at its brightest — 530

Some Ladies No, that's for sure!

Others Yes, everyone agrees.

Mrs Halm She mayn't have learnt to cook at school, but she
will surely learn the knack this coming fall.

Miss Skjære Embroider her own wedding finery.

An Aunt (pats Anna on the head)
Be sensible and so delight us all.

Falk (laughs aloud)
O what good sense — it is a parody —
your sound advice is, — mad frivolity!
Was mere good sense, then, all that he desired?
Or cook-book skills, professionally acquired?
He came here as the spring's delighted swain, 540
picked out the garden's sweetest young, wild rose:
you tended it for him; — he came again; —
what's grown? Rose-hips!

Miss Skjære(huffed) That's funny I suppose?

Falk A useful, handy fruit — by God, that's true!
But rose-hips aren't the spring bride that he knew.

Mrs Halm If Mr Lind has sought a ballroom-lover,
too bad; she isn't one as he'll discover.

Falk O yes, I know the current preconception,
the toying with ideals of homely life;
it is the root-stock of a huge deception 550
that grows tall as a beanstalk, just as rife.
I take my hat off, ma'am, to "ballroom-lovers", —
for such a one is beauty's progeny,
the ideal spreads a golden net that covers
the ballroom, scarcely, though, the nursery.

Mrs Halm (with barely suppressed acerbity)
It isn't hard to find an explanation
for your behaviour; a fiancé's lost
to his old circle, that's it, — to their cost;
I've learnt my lesson in that situation.

Falk Of course — seven nieces, all wed I might mention — 560

Mrs Halm And married happily!

Falk (with emphasis) Are you *quite* sure?

Guldstad What?

Miss Skjære Mr Falk! Why —

Lind Is it your intention
to stir up trouble!

Falk (bursts out) Yes, dissension, war.

Styver What you, a layman, novice, just a wag!

Falk Forget that; I'll still raise aloft my flag!
Fight with my hands and, yes, I'll use my boots,
fight the big lie with its great massive roots,
the lie that you've looked after well and watered
until it looks like truth, completely altered!

Styver Objection; testimony's so much dross; 570
I rest my case till later — —

Miss Skjære O shut up!

Falk So *that's* love's quenching spring from which to sup,
that whispers the unhappy widow's loss, —
that vernal love whose happiest achievement
was to delete the words "grief" and "bereavement".
So that's the *love triumphant*, undismayed
that courses through the married couple's veins; —
the love that boldly manned the palisade,
that trod convention underfoot and made
a mock of all the fools the world contains! 580
So that is *love's* resplendent, lovely flame
that keeps fiancés going for so long,
for years! Of course! It is the very same
that moved our humble clerk to take to song!
So *that's* the rapture young love feels so dearly,
that's scared to venture o'er the ocean shelf,
demanding sacrifice, when it should really
shine boldly forth — *by sacrificing self!* —
O no, you mundane prophets of evasion,
for once let's give the thing its proper name; 590
let's call the widow's state loss, deprivation,
the married state mere *habit*, dull and tame!

Strawman No, no, young man, you go too far, such cheek!
There's blasphemy in every word you speak!
(*stands face to face with Falk*)
I'll gird my jerkin on now to give battle
for old beliefs against the modern prattle!

Falk I go to battle as unto a feast.

Strawman Good! You will find I'll face the fire, not weaken. (*moves closer*)
A wedded pair's as sacred as a priest.

Styver (on Falk's other side)
And an engaged man —

Falk Half and half, a deacon. 600

Strawman Look at these children; see this little throng?
They can already sing my victory song!
How was it possible — how could you do it — —
no, truth's all-powerful, no answer to it; —
who but a fool would want to shut his ears?
See, — *they're* love-children, all these little dears — — —
(*breaks off embarrassed*)
o, that's to say — no, well of course I meant — !

Miss Skjære That is the very oddest of expressions.

Falk See, you've refuted your own argument;
one of our good old national obsessions. 610
You've separated wedlock's covenants
from love's own ditto; — how percipient;
they're chalk and cheese, completely different,
like flowers growing wild and potted plants.
With us, love soon becomes a branch of learning,
long since divorced from passion's tender yearning.
With us love has become a kind of trade;

it has its guild, a banner to parade;
with separate ranks for sweethearts, husbands, — why,
they serve apprenticeships and qualify;
for it's a union, like a bed of kelp. 620
A choir's the one thing missing; that would help —
Guldstad A journal, too!
Falk Right! You shall have a journal!
That was a good idea; we've several such
for children, women, hunters, congregations.
I hope the cost won't bother us too much.
And *there* you'll see, as in some demonstrations,
each motley group bound by a bond fraternal;
we'll print each blushing note that the adorers —
the Williams — wrote to their sweet, bashful Lauras; 630
we'll print among events that are quite dire, —
including murders, crinolines on fire, —
engagements broken in the week as well!
We'll advertise there, under Buy and Sell,
where second-hand rings fetch far lower prices;
announce the birth of twins and triplets too, —
and as for weddings, we'll drum up the crew,
the federation that a show entices.
Engagement called off? It shall be headlined
amongst a page of other newsy pieces. 640
“Love's demon claims a victim; toll increases!”
Yes, it will thrive, you'll see; for at the stage
when readers may not like my coverage,
I'll use a hook that won't leave them for dead; —
I'll slay a bachelor, — on centre spread.
You'll see me back the public all the way;
a tiger, yes — as editor I'll prey —
Guldstad The title?
Falk “Love's Norwegian Shooting News”
Styver (*draws near*)
But are you serious? What, would you choose
to risk your reputation in this way? 650
Falk I'm deadly serious. The current view
is one can't live on what love may afford;
I'll prove that claim entirely untrue,
I'll live on love as richly as a lord,
especially if Miss Skjære, as I trust,
will soon write Mr Strawman's “Life's Romance”
to come out in instalments, as it must.
Strawman (*alarmed*)
What sort of scheme is that? My sacred aunts!
My life's romance! When was *my* life romantic?
Miss Skjære I never said that — !
Styver He mistook her meaning! 660
Strawman What! *I've* been guilty of, why, contravening
the customary rules! The lie's gigantic!

Falk All right. (*slaps Styver on the shoulder*)
 Here stands a friend who will prove staunch.
 I'll print our law-clerk's verses for my launch.

Styver (glances at the parson aghast)
 You must be mad! No, I must have my say! —
 You dare allege that I write verse — —

Miss Skjære Heavens, no — !

Falk Your office leaked the rumour anyway.

Styver (in high dudgeon)
 Our office doesn't leak, I'd have you know!

Falk You've let me down, you too; but I have just
 one faithful brother still whom I can trust. 670
 I'm waiting for 'Heart's Saga', one of Lind's,
 whose love's too delicate for ocean winds,
 who'd sacrifice, for love, his nation's soul, —
 thus showing feeling in its noblest role!

Mrs Halm I can't put up with this, not any longer.
 We cannot share one roof another day; —
 please leave at once, I cannot put it stronger.

Falk (with a bow as the company goes indoors)
 I had expected that, I have to say.

Strawman It's war between us now, war to the knife;
 you've slandered me, together with my wife, 680
 yes, children too, from Trina down to Anna; —
 crow, Mr Falk, — in true idealist manner —
 (*breaks off and goes indoors with wife and children*)

Falk And you — tread Peter's path, display *his* vice *
 with *your* love, love abandoned in a trice,
 denied before the cock-crow sounded thrice!

Miss Skjære (in pain)
 Come with me Styver; help me with my stays,
 they need unhooking — quick, — I'm in a daze.

Styver (to Falk as he leaves with Miss Skjære on his arm)
 I must renounce our friendship!

Lind So must I.

Falk (gravely) You too, Lind!

Lind Yes, farewell!

Falk You were my nearest — —

Lind That doesn't count; she wishes it, my dearest. 690
 (*he goes indoors; Svanhild remains standing by the verandah step*)

Falk So there we are, now I have room to spare; —
 I've settled everything now!

Svanhild Falk, a word!

Falk (with a polite gesture towards the house)
 That way young lady; that is where the herd
 of friends, the aunts, your mother went, in there.

Svanhild (draws closer)
 Yes, let them go, my way is my decision,
 the crowd won't be increased by my addition.

Falk You *won't* go?

Svanhild No. If you'll confront the lie
I'll stay, a squire on whom you can rely.

Falk You, Svanhild; you —

Svanhild Who yesterday indeed — ?

O, Falk, were you then, yesterday the same? 700
You bade me like a youngster with his reed —
Falk The reed-pipe fluted, fluted me to shame!
No, it was child's play *then*, you're right I fear;
but you have roused me to a task far higher; —
amid the tumult rears a mighty spire,
the church where truth shall ring out loud and clear.
It's not enough, like some divinity,
to gaze *aloof* upon the wild unrest; —
one must bear beauty's emblem on one's breast,
like Olaf's cross upon his panoply, — 710
must gaze farsighted o'er the far-flung field,
though wreathed in warfare's chaos, never yield, —
to catch a glimpse of sun behind the cloud —
that's the demand life makes, imperiously!
Svanhild And you'll meet that demand when you stand free,
and stand alone.

Falk Was I, *then*, with the crowd?
And *that's* the challenge. No, it's over now,
my pact with heaven, my own private vow.
I've done with poetry within four walls,
my verse shall *live* outdoors, the rowan calls, 720
my battle shall be waged in open field; —
I, or lie's falsehood — one of us shall yield!
Svanhild Turn with a blessing then, from verse to deed!
I have misjudged you; you are warm at heart;
forgive me, — no ill feelings as we part —
Falk My future's craft holds two, in case of need!
We are not parting. Svanhild, if you dare,
we'll fight the fight together as a pair!
Svanhild Together?

Falk Look, I stand bereft of all,
at odds with friends, acquaintances who vent 730
their venom on me, harsh and virulent; —
so tell me, are you with me, stand or fall?
My future road's the well-worn highway now,
where feet, bogged down in caution's mire, linger; —
there, like the others, I shall strut and bow,
and place a ring on my belovèd's finger!
(*takes a ring off his hand and holds it aloft*)
Svanhild (*breathless with tension*)
That's what you — ?

Falk Yes, and we shall show the world
that love possesses its own special power
that carries it unscathed and in full flower
through life's prosaic mud and chores, unfurled. 740

I pointed out my bonfire yesterday,
that blazed just like some mountain-sited beacon; —
you as a woman, you recoiled, would weaken;
now I point out a woman's proper way!
The vows it made, a soul like yours will keep;
the gulf's before you, — Svanhild, make the leap!

Svanhild (scarcely audible)

And if we fall — ?

Falk (jubilant)

O no, the gleam I see
there in your eye confirms our hope of winning!

Svanhild

Then take me as I am, take all of me!
The leaves are sprouting now; my spring's beginning!
(*she throws herself boldly into his arms as the curtain falls!*)

750

ACT III

(Evening; bright moonlight. Coloured lights burn amongst the trees. In the background, tables laid with bottles of wine, glasses, cakes etc. From the house, where all the windows are lit, can be heard the faint sound of a piano and singing during the scene that follows. Svanhild stands by the verandah. Falk enters right with some books and a portfolio under his arm. The valet follows with a suitcase and valise.)

Falk Is that the lot then?

Valet Yes sir, just about;
there's only your light coat still to come out
and a small knapsack.

Falk Good, I'll carry those
myself. It's time we started I suppose; —
look, here's the folder.

Valet All tied up I see.

Falk Yes, Sivert, all tied up.

Valet Right.

Falk It's to be
burnt, please, at once.

Valet Burnt?

Falk Yes, to ash — consign (*smiling*)
each dud poetic I.O.U. of mine.

The books too, — you can keep them, for I shan't.

Valet O no, I can't accept them, really can't. 10

But Mr Falk — abandon all your books?

You've finished learning then? That's how it looks.

Falk What can be learnt from books I've learnt already —
and far, far more.

Valet Far more? Now take it steady!

Falk Well, hurry up; the porter's at the door; —
now you must help adjust the load, what's more.

(the valet exits left)

Falk (*approaches Svanhild, who comes to meet him*)

This is our moment, Svanhild, you and I
in God's light, under evening's constellations;
see how they glitter through the leaves on high
like fruit, the tree of life's new generations. 20

I've broken the last shackles, now I am
at last relieved from being scourged and whipped;
now, like the tribe of Jacob, I'm equipped,
with staff in hand, to serve the paschal lamb. *

You purblind generation, too abased
to glimpse the promised land beyond the waste,
slaves of the age, who do as you are bid,
go build a royal grave its pyramid, —
I seek out freedom though the present's stark;
a freedom found where strong tides ebb and flow, 30

but falsehood's crafty host, my deadly foe,
 shall find its grave-plot dug *there*, deep and dark!
(pauses briefly; he looks at her and takes her hand.)
 You are so quiet, Svanhild.

Svanhild Happy so!
 O leave me to my dreams, o let me dream.
 Speak for me; then my budding thoughts will grow,
 bloom into song, like water lilies, show
 their fullness in the smooth tarn's placid stream.

Falk No, say it once again, that you are mine,
 in that firm voice of yours, that candid tone!
 O say it Svanhild, say —

Svanhild (throws herself into his arms) Yes, I am thine! 40

Falk My songbird, sent by God to me alone!

Svanhild Yes, I was homeless in my mother's house,
 I was a lonely soul, I must confess,
 a guest unbidden at joy's blithe carouse, —
 meant nothing there — yes, sometimes even *less*.
 And then you came! At long last I could find
 another who could voice what's in my mind;
 you could give shape to my vague aspiration,
 you spark of youth mid life's old generation!
 You half-repelled me with your intellect, 50
 yet in a flash attracted my respect,
 just as a leafy strand attracts the sea
 and rocks repel the billows' urgency.

I've seen now to the bottom of your soul,
 you *have* me now, entirely and whole;
 you are the tree, dear, on that wave-teased shore,
 my heart flows strongly now, will ebb no more!
Falk Thanks be to God, then, He who has baptised
 my love in pain's font. It had scarcely crossed
 my mind, what drew me to you till, apprised, 60
 I saw in you a treasure nearly lost.
 Yes, praise to Him who in my book of life
 has graced with sorrow's signet my love's course,
 who gave us leave to overcome our strife
 and bade us both ride, pledged as man and wife,
 home through the forest on the wingèd horse. *

Svanhild (points towards the house)
 In every room inside there's celebration,
there lamplight's shining on the happy pair,
there sound the friendly songs and conversation.
 A passer-by could well believe that *there* 70
 amid gay chatter one can find true bliss. (*pityingly*)
 You lucky child in worldly terms — poor Sis!

Falk You say she's poor?

Svanhild Yes poor; has she not split
 her precious soul with *him* and all his kin?
 A hundred hands it's been invested in

till no-one owes her for the whole of it.
 There isn't one she can rely on *solely*,
 not one to dedicate her life to *wholly*!
 O I am ten-fold wealthier than her;
 I've just one single person to prefer. 80
 When you first came, brave banner fluttering,
 and countless songs, my heart was empty still;
 now you pervade my soul like fragrant spring;
 you lead my thoughts whichever way you will.
 Yes, I thank God at this auspicious time
 that I was lonely till you came in sight; —
 that I was dead and heard the church bell chime
 that bade me leave the vain world for the light.
Falk Yes we, who have no friends to call our own,
 we are the wealthy ones; we share joy's treasure, 90
 we two who stand out in the dark, alone,
 and gaze through windows at the scenes of pleasure;
 let lamplight shine, the music be entrancing
 as those inside enjoy their merry dancing; —
 look higher, Svanhild, — up into the blue; — —
 a thousand little lamps shine bright there too. —
Svanhild Hush, listen dearest, — on night's balmy breeze
 a music swells among the linden trees.
Falk It is for us they glitter in their throng —
Svanhild It is for us it sings the dale a song. 100
Falk I feel I am God's prodigal; the heir
 who failed Him, fell into the worldly net.
 He beckoned me, come home without repining;
 and now I've come He lights the lamp that's shining,
 prepares a welcome for his new-found son,
 pours for me secretly his benison.
 Since then I've sworn that I shall never falter, —
 will guard, as sentinel, the camp of light.
 We shall as one — for our love will not alter —
 compose a hymn to love's triumphant might. 110
Svanhild And see how easy victory is for two,
 when he's a *man* —
Falk She, *woman*, through and through; —
 it is impossible for them to lose!
Svanhild To war with deprivation then, and sorrow;
 (*shows Falk his ring which she wears on her finger*)
 I'll go at once and tell them all the news!
Falk (hastily) No, Svanhild, don't go now; wait till tomorrow!
 This evening we shall pluck joy's blooming rose;
 sheer sacrilege if chores should interpose.
 (*the garden-room door opens*)
 Your mother! Hide! I won't have prying eyes
 inspecting you this evening as my bride! 120
 (*they go out through the trees towards the summer-house. Mrs Halm and Guldstad*
come out onto the verandah)

Mrs Halm He's really leaving!
Guldstad Yes, that's no surprise.
Styver (enters) He's leaving ma'am!
Mrs Halm O heavens — yes, we're wide
 awake, we see!
Styver A contretemps I dreaded!
 He'll keep his word; I know him, he's pig-headed.
 He plasters us across his wretched pages;
 my sweetheart has been featured several times,
 amongst engagements off, twins, wedding chimes.
 I tell you what — why don't we try, by stages
 if you can bear it, peaceful arbitration?
Mrs Halm D'you think he would agree?
Styver I think so, yes. 130
 There's evidence, unproven, nonetheless
 suggesting that his new aggressiveness
 was the result of his intoxication.
 Yes, there is proof, although it might be questioned,
 that tells against the person afore-mentioned;
 it is the case that when he left the table,
 he turned up in the room he shares with Lind
 and there behaved most wildly, quite unstable,
 he smashed things — —
Guldstad *(catches a glimpse of Falk and Svanhild, who separate as Falk goes
 upstage into the background; Svanhild stays behind, concealed by the
 summer-house.)*
 Wait! There's something in the wind!
 One moment, Mrs Halm! Falk isn't going, 140
 or if he is, he's leaving as a friend.
Styver What? Do you think — ?
Mrs Halm Ah, will you never end!
Guldstad No worse than usual, madam, on this showing;
 I'll manage things to benefit us all.
 If we might have a chat —
Mrs Halm Right — where's my shawl?
*(they go off into the garden together; during what follows they can be
 seen now and then in the background, conversing animatedly.)*
Styver *(steps down into the garden, where he encounters Falk, who stands
 looking out over the water.)*
 You poet gentry are a vicious crew;
 we civil servants, statesmen, through and through.
 I'll work things out as I see fit —
(catches sight of Strawman emerging from the garden-room.)
 oh, oh!
Strawman *(on the verandah)* He's really leaving! *(goes to join Styver.)*
 My dear fellow, go, —
 just step inside a moment, have my spouse — 150
Styver What, have your wife, in there, inside the house!
Strawman Just chat with you I mean. Our young, you know,
 we parents, stick together. It is rare,

if ever — (*as his wife and children emerge through the door.*)

They're already on the stair.

Mrs Strawman Where are you, Strawman?

Strawman (*quietly to Syver*) Think up something, do,
that might detain them — and amuse them, too!

Syver (*approaches the paling.*)

Has madam read our latest circular?

A model of good style, our best so far; —

(*takes a book out of his pocket.*)

I'll quote it in extenso if I may —

(*ushers them politely into the room and follows, Falk comes in from the garden; he and Strawman meet; they look at one another for a moment.*)

Strawman Well?

Falk Well?

Strawman Now, Mr Falk!

Falk Now, pastor!

Strawman Pray, 160
have you thought better since we parted?

Falk No.

My path's inflexible, and there I'll go —

Strawman Even if it's your poor neighbour's hopes you tread?

Falk I'll plant truth's herb to fill their place instead.

No doubt you're thinking of my new device, (*smiling*)

Love's Journal?

Strawman That, perhaps, was just a joke?

Falk Believe me, yes, that scheme's gone up in smoke;
it's deeds, not print I'll use to break the ice.

Strawman Excuse me, but I'm sure I know someone 170
who won't escape scot-free, without a mark;

he'll take advantage, will that lawyer's clerk, —

and you'll be rightly blamed for what you've done.

You've stirred up ancient feuds I hoped might cease

and you can wager he won't hold his peace

were I to utter just one word, look you,

opposing shrill demands made by his crew.

These civil-servants have a strangle-hold

on papers now-a-days, or so I'm told.

One penny-hap'nny article can slay

my reputation, printed in the leaders 180

that smite like any Samson, fire away,

start casting nets and snares before their readers,

especially when there's quarter-day to handle.

Falk (*conceding*) Well — there your case was something of a scandal — —

Strawman (*depressed*) No matter. They've the space, they wouldn't falter;
they'd sacrifice me on revenge's altar.

Falk (*humorously*)

You mean on *retribution's*. Well deserved.

In life we're haunted by a Nemesis;

it soon or late creeps on us unobserved —

no-one escapes, it never aims to miss. 190

If one has sinned against the great ideal,
in wades the press, agog and full of glee,
and one must bear the punishment, I feel.

Strawman But when — good heavens — when did I agree
with that “ideal” to which you just referred?
I’m married, I am many times a dad, —
remember the twelve infants that I’ve had;
I’m tied to daily chores as you’ll have heard,
I’ve several chapels, parish to upkeep,
a lot of cattle, spiritual sheep, — 200
they must be tended, cared for, sheared and fed;
there’s threshing, one must turn the compost bed;
I’m needed in the byre, when they grind meal; —
when have *I* time to live for the ideal!

Falk Well, off you go back home, but heed my warning;
before it’s winter, crawl beneath your thatch.
Look, in young Norway now the day is dawning;
the host is strong in number, without match;
the banner’s filling with the breeze of morning.

Strawman And if, young man, I went home — just suppose — 210
to all my family, indeed all those
that formed my little kingdom yesterday,
would things still seem, today, well, much the same?
D’you think I’d be as rich as when I came — (*Falk tries to answer*)
no wait, and hear what I have got to say. (*draws nearer*)
Once I was young, as you are now, but I
was less intrepid, daring on the whole.
I toiled for bread, and there the years went by;
such work may callous hands but not the soul.
I’m from the north; my home was ringed with moors, 220
my whole world limited to parish chores. —
My home — Falk! Do you know what home is, really?

Falk (shortly) I’ve never known one.

Strawman I believe that’s true.
A home is where there’s room for five, ideally,
but if they don’t get on, it’s cramped for two.
A home is where your thoughts need no permission
to romp like children on their father’s knee,
it’s where your voice no sooner seeks admission
than other hearts respond in harmony.
A home is where your hair can turn quite grey 230
but no-one notes you’re aging by degrees,
where cherished memories grow faint but stay,
like hazy ridges looming through the trees.

Falk (with forced derision) You seem aggrieved —

Strawman By something you find funny!
The Lord has shaped us so unlike, we two.
I lack what *you* have, all your milk and honey;
but I have gained what’s been denied to you.

There's many a seed of truth, viewed from on high,
 seems, scattered by the wayside, a mere lie;
 you soar, I hardly reach the chimney-cowl, — 240
 one bird is hatched an eagle —

Falk One, a fowl.
Strawman Yes, you can laugh, it's true, I can't deny.
 Yes, I'm a barnyard-fowl; — right! But my wing
 protects a young brood, you've not got a thing!
 And I've the barnyard-fowl's nerve, its big heart
 and I put up a fight for them when needed.
 I know you find me stupid for your part,
 may think still worse of me — yes, point conceded —
 think I'm too keen on worldly wealth what's more; —
 good, we've no call to quarrel on that score! 250
(grips Falk's arm quietly but with mounting vehemence)
 Yes I am stupid, listless too and greedy;
 but greedy for God's gift, my family,
 made stupid by the war forced on the needy,
 grown listless sailing loneliness's sea.
 But as my youthful vessel, sail by sail
 went down beneath the endless timber-shakers,
 another showed, and foaming at the rail,
 bore briskly landward mirrored in the breakers.
 For every dream the turmoil made go under,
 for every feather broken during flight, 260
 I had a gift from God, a little wonder,
 one I gave praise for, welcomed with delight.
 It's *them* I strove for, strove to heap up treasure.
 I helped them to interpret Holy Writ; —
 my little flowers, dear to me past measure; —
 and you have poisoned them with mocking wit!
 You've proved, both as an æsthete and a writer,
 my happiness delusion of a kind,
 my firm beliefs you've proved were even slighter; —
 I now demand of you my peace of mind, 270
 but give it me unflawed, intact I say —

Falk You want *me* to define true happiness — ?
Strawman Yes, you have cast a stone across my way,
 which only you can raise, doubt's stone no less.
 Remove the barrier barring me from mine
 that you've built, take the yoke from off my neck —

Falk D'you think I peddle falsehood's glue on spec
 to mend joy's fragments and make all seem fine?
Strawman I've faith the faith your words have sought to flout
 you can restore by words too, in like manner; 280
 you can re-weld the links and make them stout; — —
 consider, — tell the full truth, come, be bold,
 advise again, — and let me hoist my banner. —

Falk (proudly) I cannot stamp brass happiness as gold.
Strawman (looks at him steadily)

Remember what was said a while back there,
by someone on the scent of candour's hare.

(with raised finger)

"In life we're haunted by a Nemesis;
no-one escapes, it never aims to miss."

(goes into the house)

Styver (comes out wearing spectacles and with an open book in his hand)

Ah, Pastor, you must hurry, your young brood
are crying —

Children (in the doorway)

Daddy!

Styver

And your wife is waiting! —

290

(Strawman goes into the house)

Wives have no time for serious debating.

Falk! *(puts his book and spectacles into his pocket and draws nearer)*

Falk

Yes!

Styver

I hope you've had a change of mood.

Falk

Why's that then?

Styver

O, it makes quite simple sense;

you surely know it's thought to be essential
not to divulge what's strictly confidential; —
because one's duty-bound to reticence.

Falk

No, I have heard that's risky, an offence.

Styver

By god that's true!

Falk

But only for the nobs.

Styver (eagerly) It's risky for the staff in office jobs.

Imagine how my whole career might fare
if he were to suspect, that boss of ours,
I kept a Pegasus to whinny there
in *such* an office and in working hours.
From Audit Office to the Church Commission
the wingèd horse's work could earn dismissal.
But even worse if I were known, in fact,
to have broken their official secrets act
and leaked a matter of some consequence.

300

Falk

Such carelessness then rates as an offence?

Styver (confidentially)

It could compel a civil servant, say,
to file his resignation straight away.
That is the law on our official labours,
to keep our lips sealed even amongst neighbours.

310

Falk

But it's tyrannical, it's sheer oppression
to gag a clerk low down in the profession.

Styver (shrugs) That's what the law says though, like it or not.

Besides, just now when wage-reviews are pending,
and salaries may alter quite a lot,
it isn't wise to broadcast how we're spending
our working hours and indeed on what.

320

That's why I beg you: hold your peace; now look,
one word could lose me —

Falk Your portfolio?
Styver Officially known as “copy-book”.
That ledger is a brooch that hides from show
the office bosom, pins its blouse in place;
to grope behind *that* would invite disgrace.
Falk Yet *you* it was who urged me speak, drop some
broad hint about the treasure in your desk.
Styver That’s true. Was I to know the depths he’d plumb,
a pastor so well off that it’s grotesque, 330
who’s got a living, family and wife
and money too, to bear the brunt of life?
If he can prove so base a philistine
what hope is there for clerks with jobs like mine,
for *me*, who simply can’t expect promotion,
who’ve a fiancée that I’ll soon have wedded,
and there’ll be family to be housed and bedded,
etcetera! (*more vehemently*)
Were *I* rich — what a notion —
I’d arm myself against the worldly host
and thump the table-top — that’s not a boast. 340
And were I single, I as well as you,
I’d plough right through the drifts, I’d have you know,
to the ideal that’s buried in the snow!
Falk Then *do* it, man!
Styver What?
Falk Now, your time is due!
Don’t heed the worldly owl’s censorious cries;
freedom makes caterpillars butterflies!
Styver (recoils)
You mean break off — ?
Falk Why yes, you might as well, —
remove the pearl, and what use is the shell?
Styver Such notions well might suit a student binge,
they’d make a decent legal person cringe! 350
The fifth King Christian passed a law — my source —
on promises of marriage, though of course
that was in *his* time; nowadays it’s true,
it’s not in Breach of Contract, ’42;
so insofar as breach was not a crime,
and broke no law, it isn’t criminal —
Falk Well, there you are!
Styver Well yes, but in our time
the exception’s rarely mentioned, if at all.
In hard times she’s stood by me, she’s a treasure,
she doesn’t ask much in the way of pleasure, 360
and I am happy, quite contented that
I am a home-bird, a born beurocrat.
Let others follow flocks of swans in flight;
a modest life can also prove just right.
What did the Councillor, Herr Goethe say *

about the white and shining Milky Way?
 No-one can cream off happiness from *that*,
 still less find a supply of butter-fat —
Falk Were butter-churning what you would select,
 still, as you toil, your guide must be the soul; — 370
 a man's his age's burgher, must respect
 its civic aspirations, fit the role.
 What's small can be attractive, on one hand;
 the *art*, though, is to *see* and *understand*.
 Not everyone who's happy clearing dung
 can fancy he's a shire-horse, nobly sprung.
Styver Then let us go, in peace, our even way;
 we don't obstruct your road, we choose to stay
 on well-marked paths, you'd rather range the fells.
 Hmm, we went ranging there too, she and I; 380
 but *real* life means not song but drudgery, —
 however one may live, it's work that tells.
 You see, our youth is one long legal hearing,
 and that's what irks, the last thing that we needed; —
 go for a compromise, don't try appealing;
 you'd lose your every right if you proceeded.

Falk (confidently and self-assured as he glances towards the summer-house)
 No, were it from the highest court of law, —
 the verdict will be merciful, I'm sure!
 I know that couples can well keep *alive*,
 their faith, enthusiasm, still survive; 390
 your doctrine, though, is mean, contemporary:
 that the ideal is purely secondary.

Styver No, it comes first; it's full of zest and yet
 like blossom, fades as soon as fruit-buds set.
(inside, the sound of the piano and of Miss Skjære singing: "Ach, du lieber Augustin". Styver stops and listens with great rapture.)
 She sings that song to call me, does my pet,
 the song that spoke the first time that we met.
(he puts his hand on Falk's arm and gazes into his eyes)
 Whenever she brings *that* to life with passion
 my darling's keyboard echoes in such fashion
 that the ecstatic 'yes' revives again.
 And when at last our loving season ends, 400
 and dies, and we're reborn as bosom friends,
 it will link *then* and *now*, will that refrain.
 Though desk-work bend my back — I'll not grow younger —
 my daily toil become a fight with hunger,
 I'll make my way home, though the road be long,
 where still the past is conjured up in song.
 If there's one measly evening we can share
 I'll have escaped, undamaged, from the snare!
(he goes into the house. Falk turns towards the summer-house. Svanhild comes out; she is pale and agitated. They look at each other for a moment in silence then throw themselves into each other's arms.)

Falk O, Svanhild, let's stay loyal, side by side!
 You fresh wild-flower in the graveyard; — see 410
 what they call life in springtime's infancy!
 They smell of corpse, the bridegroom and the bride;
 they smell of corpse, each couple you may meet
 on our street corners, — o, their smiles are sweet,
 but inwardly dank sepulchres of lies,
 death's torpor marks their every enterprise.
 And that's what they call *living*! 'Pon my soul,
 is such a burden worth that rigmarole?
 To raise a brood of children just for *that*;
 feed them on morals, duty, till they're fat; 420
 stuff them with faith until the hour tolls
 announcing slaughter-time for their young souls!

Svanhild Let's go away, Falk!

Falk Go? And where to, pray?
 The whole world over, isn't it the same,
 and doesn't everybody's wall display
 the same lie decked in truth's neat glass and frame?
 No, we'll stay here, enjoy the trumpery,
 the clowning and the tragicomedy, —
 a nation that *believes* the nation's *lies*!
 Look at the priest, his wife, Lind, Styver — they 430
 all played at trick-or-treat, they proved to be
 liars at heart, though honest outwardly, —
 yet still they're decent folk too, in their way!
 They lie both to themselves and one another;
 the fact of lying, *that* they seek to smother; —
 each one, though on his beam-ends otherwise,
 thinks he's a Cræsus, blessed with luck; none feels
 it's *they* who drove *themselves* from Paradise
 into the brim-stone pit, head over heels;
 but none of them can see themselves aright, 440
 and each one thinks he's Paradise's knight,
 and each one smiles even though the going's rough;
 and if the Devil comes, all huff and puff,
 with horns and cloven hooves — and worse quite likely —
 he'll nudge his neighbour, chide him with a gruff
 "Take off your hat, look, there goes God Almighty!"

Svanhild (after a brief, thoughtful silence)
 How wonderful — a loving hand has shown
 me where the spring-tide path leads on ahead.
 The life I've played at in vague dreams, alone,
 I shall from now on call my daily bread. 450
 O, gracious God! I groped through life, groped blindly, —
 you summoned light — led me to Him, so kindly!
(looks at Falk with loving wonderment)
 What strength there is in you, you mighty tree
 amidst the wind-felled trunks, the forest's grave,
 who stand robust, alone, yet shelter me

from harm — ?

Falk It's *God's* truth, Svanhild, makes one brave.

Svanhild (*glances with some wariness towards the house*)

They came like evil tempters, those two — show
they're spokesmen for each side in our time's schism.

One asks how youthful love can hope to grow
when soul's weighed down by sheer materialism.

460

The other asks: what place has love in life
when poverty imposes endless strife?

It's horrible — to preach, pontificating
on gospel truth, yet still endure life's baiting!

Falk And what if that's *our* lot?

Svanhild Our lot? What then?

Can circumstances change our regimen?

I have already told you: if you'll fight

I'll stand and fall beside you. O `tis light, *

the Bible's call: leave home, through joy and pain
follow the loved-one unto *God's* domain.

470

Falk (*embraces her*)

Come winter then, however wild your weather!

We cannot fail, we'll face the storm together.

(*Mrs Halm and Guldstad enter backstage right. Falk and Svanhild remain
standing by the summer-house*)

Guldstad (*quietly*)

See, Ma'am?

Mrs Halm (*astonished*) Together!

Guldstad Still in doubt? But why?

Mrs Halm It's quite astonishing.

Guldstad I've often spotted
him quietly brooding on some scheme he's plotted.

Mrs Halm (*agitated*)

Who could have thought that Svanhild was so sly?

(*crossly, to Guldstad*)

But no, I can't believe it —

Guldstad Well, let's see.

Mrs Halm This very moment?

Guldstad Yes, decisively.

Mrs Halm (*holds her out hand to him*)

May God be with you!

Guldstad (*seriously*) Thanks, may need Him, yes.

(*moves downstage*)

Mrs Halm (*looks after him as he moves away*)

Whatever happens she'll find happiness.

480

(*goes into the house*)

Guldstad (*approaches Falk*)

Not in a hurry are you?

Falk The next chime

means I must leave.

Guldstad That gives us ample time.

Svanhild (*trying to leave*) Goodbye!

Guldstad No, stay!
Svanhild Must I?
Guldstad Till you've replied.
Things must be straight between us, clarified; —
we must speak frankly now, whoever wins.
Falk (surprised)
We three?
Guldstad Yes, Falk, — we three must slough our skins.
Falk (suppressing a smile)
Your servant, sir.
Guldstad Then listen. Some half-year
has passed since we first grew acquainted; we —
well, we have squabbled —
Falk Yes.
Guldstad Could not agree;
fired broadsides at each other without pause; 490
you seemed the leader of a noble cause,
I, a mere business man, brought up the rear.
And yet it seemed some bond still bound us tight
together, as though old forgotten stories
from my own youth's great store of former glories
had been tracked down by you and brought to light.
Yes, yes, you look at me; but my grey crown
had hair that spring would ruffle, and still brown,
a brow that, though a calling of my kind
drenched it in servile sweat, was never lined. 500
Enough of that now; business is my trade —
Falks (laughs derisively)
You're sound, your judgement's of the highest grade. —
Guldstad And you, the bright, young bard of aspiration.
(steps between them)
So, Falk and Svanhild, that's why I stand here.
Now we must speak; for the occasion's near
whose scutcheon heralds joy or desolation.
Falk (tensely) Then speak!
Guldstad (smiling) I said last night that I was pondering
a sort of poem —
Falk One that's factual —
Guldstad (nods slowly) True!
Falk And if one asks the source on which you drew — ?
Guldstad (glances at Svanhild for a moment, then turns back to Falk)
The self-same ground that we have both been wandering. 510
Svanhild I must go now.
Guldstad No, stay and hear me out.
I've never begged a woman in this way;
I've learnt to know you, Svanhild, without doubt;
your soul's too rich for modesty's display;
I've watched you grow, unfold in your full pride;
you're all that I admire in womankind; —
I saw you as a daughter — I was blind.

I ask you now — will you become my bride?

(*Svanhild recoils*)

Falk (grabs him by the arm) That's quite enough!

Guldstad

Calm down; it's her decision.

You ask her too — let *her* choose, willingly.

520

Falk I — did you say?

Guldstad (looks at him steadily) We've now reached a position affecting not *one* happiness but three.

It doesn't help, your putting on a show;

though my profession isn't highly rated

I've gained a sort of perspicacity.

Yes, Falk, you love her. I was quite elated

to see your young love blossom forth and grow;

but that same love, the strong, the daring sort,

that's what may snap her happiness off short!

Falk You dare say that!

Guldstad (calmly) By right of my grey hairs.

530

If you should win her —

Falk

What then?

Guldstad

Say she dares

risk building everything on that foundation,

stakes *everything* upon that single card, —

and life's storm sweeps the site then, blowing hard,

time's shadow fades the bloom's bright colouration —

Falk (forgets himself and blurts out)

Impossible!

Guldstad (looks at him meaningfully)

Hmm, yes, I thought so too

when I was your age. I can well recall

I fell in love; ways parted, as they do.

We met last evening; nothing left at all.

Falk Last evening?

Guldstad (with a grave smile)

Yes, you know the pastor's dame —

540

Falk What? Was it she who —

Guldstad

Yes, who lit the flame.

For years I mourned for her like anything,

for years her memory haunted my despair,

how she was then, her young, fair flowering

when first we met, when spring was in the air.

And now you're lighting that same foolish flame,

you try your luck in that same risky game, —

you see that's why I say to you: Be wary!

Just pause and think; your game's not for the chary.

Falk I've told the tea-party of my belief,

550

my firm belief which doubt can never shatter —

Guldstad (fills out the sentence)

That love, correctly viewed, denies all grief,

need, age, and poverty, they do not matter.

Well let it pass; perhaps it may be so;

but different views are possible you know.
 What love is, that's what no-one has unravelled;
 and where it comes from, this idyllic view
 that *individuals* suit a life for *two* —
 there's not a soul can tell — completely gravelled.
 But *marriage* is a practical affair,
 and likewise an *engagement*, my good friend; —
 it soon becomes self-evident if they're
 made for each other, *he* and *she* can blend.
 But love aims blindly, causes so much strife;
 selects a *female* merely, not a *wife*;
 but if that female isn't meant to be
 the *wife* for you — ?

560

Falk (tensely)

What then?

Guldstad (*shrugging*)

Catastrophe.

Engagements that turn out well don't rely
 on love and love alone but on much more,
 on family ties one's happy to explore,
 on shared ideas, on seeing eye to eye.
 And marriage? O yes, marriage is a sea
 of obligations, claims not easily
 compatible with love, with pure affection.
 Requires domestic skills and calm reflection,
 a knack for cooking, all that's practical,
 and self-denial, heeding duty's call, —
 and more that, while this lady here is present,
 can't be gone into, might prove less than pleasant.
 And so — ?

570

Falk

Guldstad

Take some advice, it's solid gold.

580

Draw on experience; look at your confrères,
 where every loving couple makes so bold
 as to assert that *they* are millionaires.
 They'll rush to reach the altar, two by two;
 they'll set up house, feel happy there and revel;
 a time of confidence and derring-do;
 and then the day of reckoning falls due!
 Their home's gone bankrupt now, gone to the devil!
 Bankrupt of bloom to deck the woman's cheek,
 bankrupt of thoughts to blossom in her heart,
 bankrupt of courage — the man's nerve is weak —
 bankrupt of fire that glowed there at the start;
 bankrupt, quite bankrupt now, it falls apart;
 yet when the pair moved in, they thought, alas,
 love's business-house was solvent, quite first-class!

590

Falk (*bursts out*)

That is a lie!

Guldstad (*unmoved*)

Yet it's not long ago

since it was true. It's *your* words that I cite,
 when, just like the Brabanter, you let go *
 your salvoes at the party here tonight.

Then howls of protest came from each direction 600
as they have now from you; the reason's clear;
we, all of us, are troubled when we hear
death named when we're laid low with an infection.
Look at the pastor's courting days for proof —
wrote soulful music, painted with good taste; —
why be surprised that since they shared one roof,
the pair of them, his talents went to waste?
Well suited to be love's bright seraphim,
she wasn't made to be a *wife* for *him*.
And what about that clerk who wrote good verse? 610
But then he got engaged — it makes one weep —
his rhyming promptly went from bad to worse,
and since that time his muse has gone to sleep
rocked on law's surge that's dull, monotonous.
You see then — — (*looks at Svanhild*)
Are you cold?
Svanhild (*quietly*) No, I'm not cold.
Falk (*forces a jocular tone*)
And since things never end up with a plus,
but with a minus, — why are you so bold
to risk *your* capital so recklessly
in such a poorly-paying lottery?
It might appear you think fate's destined you 620
to end up, it would seem, in bankruptcy.
Guldstad (*looks at him, smiles and shakes his head*)
My brave young Falk, spare me your flippancy.
There's not one way to set up house, but two.
It can be based on nest-eggs of illusions,
on long-term prospects that bliss never wanes, —
on being always eighteen, on delusions
about avoiding snuff, rheumatic pains; —
it can be based on cheeks forever blooming,
on flowing locks, eyes bright and debonair,
on faith that such things never fail, assuming 630
the time will never come to use false hair.
Be based on intuitions, airy notions
that in the desert blooms grow undeterred,
that hearts will, throughout life, recall emotions
roused when that first "I will" was said and heard.
What is such business called? You know, I'm sure; —
it's humbug, friends, sheer humbug, plain and pure!
Falk I see now you're a demon at temptation.
You're comfortable, perhaps a millionaire,
I'm not, *my* worldly goods cannot compare; 640
two gunners could arrange their transportation.
Guldstad What do you mean by that?
Falk No problem there.
I take your *firm* foundation allegory
to mean it's *cash* that can perform this wonder,

financing many a dowager to plunder,
 Saint Gertrude's halo in its golden glory. *

Guldstad No, it means something better in effect.
 It is the tranquil, the heart-warming stream
 of loving-kindness that conveys respect
 more than does revelling in a mirage-dream. 650
 It is the atmosphere that trust fulfils
 of loving care, peace that the home diffuses — ,
 of mutual deference to each other's wills,
 solicitude lest any stray stone bruises
 the loved-one's foot whichever path she chooses.
 It is the healing hand of the physician,
 the manly shoulder glad to bear the weight,
 composure that survives time's intermission,
 the arm that's steady, faith inviolate. —
That is the contribution I can make 660
 towards your happiness; now answer me.
 (*Svanhild struggles to speak; Guldstad raises his hand and prevents her*)
 Think well — to save your making a mistake.
 Now choose between us, calmly, carefully.

Falk What makes you think —
Guldstad That *you* want her for yours?
 I've read it deep, deep down there in your eye.
 So tell *her* too, while she is standing by. (*grasps his hand*)
 The game is over. I must go indoors.
 And if you'll swear on oath that you'll provide her
 with such a life-long friend who's staunch and true,
 with such support, a staff to prop and guide her 670
 as I can — (*turns towards Svanhild*)
 Good, then it's high time you drew
 a line through the proposal *I* made you.
 Then I'll have gained a quiet victory;
 you've won, you're happy; *that's* my wish, you see. (*to Falk*)
 And, by the way, you once referred to cash;
 Believe you me, it's little more than trash.
 I've no close ties, I've always lived alone;
 all my possessions will become your own;
 you shall be like a son and she my daughter;
 you know my farm that's in a distant quarter; 680
 I'll move there, — you'll have *your* establishment
 and in a year we'll find out how things went. —
 You know me now, Falk; now consult *your* mind.
 The voyage down life's stream is not, you'll find,
 a game to be enjoyed, mere carefree cruising; —
 so there, in heaven's name — yours for the choosing!
 (*goes into the house. A pause. Falk and Svanhild exchange furtive glances.*)
Falk You are so pale.
Svanhild And you so quiet.
Falk True.
Svanhild He was our worst trial.

Falk (vacantly) Chilled me through and through.

Svanhild His aim was shrewd.

Falk He has a marksman's eye.

Svanhild It seemed that everything had gone awry. (*draws closer*) 690
 How rich in one another we both were,
 when all the world forsook us both outright,
 when *our* thoughts lashed the shore and caused a stir,
 like crashing billows in the still of night.
 Then courage reigned triumphant in our soul,
 and trust that shared love would be ever cherished; —
 then *he* came bearing worldly gifts, he stole
 our faith, sowed doubt — now all of that has perished!

Falk (vehemently)
 Forget about it! Why, his every word
 was true for others, but for us, absurd! 700

Svanhild (gently shaking her head)
 Corn that's been laid by doubt's hail can't survive,
 it can't, despite life's havoc, wave and thrive.

Falk (with mounting anxiety) Yes, *we* two, *Svanhild* —

Svanhild O don't fantasise;
 you'll harvest tears if what you plant is lies?
 The others that you mention? Can't you see
 each one has thought the same as you and me —
 that it was *he* who dared defy the lightning —
 whose knee no storm could force to yield and bend,
 whom distant, threatening clouds, however frightening
 could never reach, engulf him, in the end? — 710

Falk The others set themselves too many a goal;
 your love is all that matters now to me.
They scare themselves in life's shrill rigmarole,
my branches shall protect you quietly.

Svanhild But if it ever fades, should ever founder,
 the love that should be strong, endure all, —
 can you provide a base that will prove sounder?

Falk No, if that failed then everything would fall.

Svanhild And dare you then, before God, make a vow
 that it will never wither or grow sear, 720
 but be as fragrant then as it is now,
 will last through *life*?

Falk (after a brief pause)
 A long time, never fear.

Svanhild (bitterly)
 "A long time"; o what phrasing, "long" indeed!
 What use is "long" to love if it's sincere?
 It dooms it, just as mildew blights the seed.
 "Love lives eternally", — now *there's* a creed —
that song must die, then, and instead we'll hear
 "I was in love the whole of this last year!"
 (*as though suddenly inspired*)
 No; no; our day of happiness shan't set,

shan't drown in drizzle in the cloudy west; — 730
 our sun shall go out like some portent, yet
 go out at noon, still shining at its best.

Falk (dismayed)

But Svanhild, what — !

Svanhild

We're children of the spring;
 there'll never be an autumn after *that*,
 when in your breast your songbirds cease to sing
 and never yearn for their old habitat.
 And after *that*, no snow will be allowed
 to wrap dream's corpses in a winter shroud; —
 our love, that love triumphant, blithe and gay
 no sickness shall consume nor age decay, — 740
 it shall die, as it lived, young, rich and proud.

Falk (deeply hurt)

If I'm not by you, what becomes of me?

Svanhild

What if we stayed together — not in love?

Falk

A home!

Svanhild

That bliss's elf was forced to flee!
 I lack the strength to be your wife I see,
 can feel it, know it now — o heavens above!
 I could have schooled you in love's playful sport,
 but daren't, in life's trials, give your soul support.
 (*comes closer, with increasing vehemence*)

We've revelled in a spring day's frolicking;
 no drowsing now on indolence's pillows! 750
 Give love's elf liberty, let it take wing
 with flocks of young gods on life's airy billows!
 And though our future's vessel may capsize, —
 one plank will float, — *I* know how it will be;
 the doughty swimmer will reach paradise!
 Let happiness go under, drown at sea;
 but *our* love, God be praised, shall still contrive,
 despite the shipwreck, to reach land alive!

Falk

I understand you! But to part like this!
 Just when the glorious world lies open too — 760
 here, in mid-spring, beneath the heavenly blue,
 the day that we baptised our youthful bliss!

Svanhild

That's why we must. Henceforth our journey will,
 our blissful journey, *needs must* go downhill.
 And woe, if on the day when we atone,
 and stand before God's judgement seat where He,
 a righteous God, demands we pay the loan
 He made us when we voyaged on life's sea —
 how *then*, Falk, will it answer if we say
 in our defence "we lost it on the way." 770

Falk (decisively)

Cast off the ring!

Svanhild (ardently)

You — ?

Falk Off! I understand!
Yes, it's the only way to you not banned!
Just as the grave leads where life's dawn is burning,
so love embraces life when it is free,
released from wild desires and from all yearning,
to seek the spiritual home of memory.
Come, Svanhild, cast it off!

Svanhild (joyfully) I've done what's right!
I've filled your soul with poetry and light!
Fly free! You've soared in triumph for the sun, —
your Svanhild's sung her swan-song, now it's done! 780
(takes off the ring and puts it to her lips)
Until the whole world falls into the sea,
sink, dream; — I sacrifice you in its stead!
(she takes a few steps upstage, throws the ring out into the fjord
and returns to Falk, her face transfigured.)
I may have lost you in the life ahead;
but I have won you for eternity!

Falk (firmly) And now to work, each in our different ways!
Our paths will never cross, that is the price.
We'll each strive bravely in our own great cause.
We were infected by the time's malaise;
sought, without fighting, victory's applause,
the Sabbath peace without the working days, — 790
though *fighting* is what's called for, *sacrifice*.

Svanhild No morbid thoughts, though.

Falk No — we shall not wilt;
we are not threatened by a flood of guilt;
the life-long memories we two have reaped
shall through the murky cloud-banks shine abroad,
stand, like a seven-hued rainbow, colour-steeped, —
as covenant between us and the Lord.
By *that* light you shall go about your duty —

Svanhild And *you* soar high, a bard in search of beauty!

Falk A bard; yes, for a bard is every man, 800
be it in school-room, parliament or kirk,
each man of high or low estate who can
glimpse the ideal concealed behind his work.
Yes, I'll soar *high*; the wingèd horse stands ready;
my call's a noble one, my faith is steady!
And now, good-bye!

Svanhild Good-bye!

Falk (embraces her) A kiss!

Svanhild The last! *(tears herself free)*
I'll gladly lose you till this life has passed.

Falk Though every light world-wide should cease to shine, —
the inspiration lives; for it's divine.

Svanhild *(withdraws into the background)*
Good-bye! *(withdraws further)*

Falk Good-bye! — I can still shout my mirth — 810

(waves his hat)
hurra for God's sublime love here on earth!
(the door opens. Falk moves right; the youngsters amongst the guests emerge in high spirits, laughing)

Young girls Let's dance outside!

A girl O, life is made for dancing!

Another A springtime dance with garlands is entrancing!

A third Yes, dance, let's dance!

Together Yes, never stop our prancing!
(Styver comes on with Strawman, arm in arm.
Mrs Strawman follows with the children)

Styver Yes, from today on, you and I are friends.

Strawman And you and I shall fight for mutual ends.

Styver When two props of the state agree some measure —

Strawman The outcome will be —

Styver (quickly) Profits!

Strawman Yes, and pleasure.
(Mrs Halm, Lind, Anna, Guldstad and Miss Skjære emerge, together with the remaining guests. All eyes are searching for Falk and Svanhild. A general flurry when they are seen to be standing apart.)

Miss Skjære (amongst the aunts) What? Am I dreaming or awake? I saw —

Lind (who has not noticed) I've got to meet my brand-new brother-in-law. 820
(he, with several of the guests, approaches Falk, but takes an involuntary step backwards to look at him and exclaims:)

What's happened to you? You are like some Janus, *
two faced!

Falk (with a smile) Yes, I'm proclaiming like Montanus: *
"The world is flat, Messieurs — my eye-sight lied;
flat as a pancake"; — are you satisfied?
(goes off right abruptly)

Miss Skjære It's off!

Aunts It's off?

Mrs Halm Hush, let's have no excess!
(approaches Svanhild)

Mrs Strawman (to the pastor) .It's off, just fancy!

Strawman Can it be?

Miss Skjære O yes!

The ladies (from one to the other) It's off! It's off!
(they huddle together in the garden)

Styver (as though turned to stone) What? He's proposed? You are — ?

Strawman Just fancy, yes! The laugh's on us, ha, ha — (laughs)
(they look at one another, speechless)

Anna (to Lind) Good riddance! Ugh, he's nasty, far too smart.

Lind (embraces and kisses her) Hurra, for you are mine now, heart and soul! 830

(they retire into the garden)

Guldstad (looks back towards Svanhild)

There's someone here who's got a broken heart;
but anything that lives still, I'll make whole.

Strawman (getting his voice back and embracing Styver)

You can be happy now, your prospect's fairer
since you're engaged still to your dear Miss Skjære.

Styver

And you can watch your progeny expand,
year after year, with yet more little Strawmen!

Strawman (rubs his hands with satisfaction and gazes after Falk)

He's got what he deserves, he's so off-hand; —
so should they all, those cocky, over-sure men!

(they go upstage deep in conversation as Mrs Halm approaches with Svanhild)

Mrs Halm (quietly and eagerly)

You're not committed then?

Svanhild

No, I am free.

Mrs Halm

O, good; so you well know a daughter's role —

840

Svanhild

Advise me.

Mrs Halm

Thank you, child.

(with a gesture towards Guldstad) He's quite a catch,
and since there's no objection on the whole —

Svanhild

Yes, one thing I insist on in the match,
I want to move —

Mrs Halm

And so, I'm sure, would he.

Svanhild

And time —

Mrs Halm

How long? Remember bliss is calling.

Svanhild (smiles quietly)

Ah, not too long; until the leaves start falling.

(she moves away towards the verandah; Mrs Halm seeks out Guldstad)

Strawman (amongst the guests)

There's one thing, my dear friends, I've learnt today:
though many doubts may well beset us sorely,
truth overcomes the serpent in its way,
and love will triumph.

Guests

Yes, will triumph surely!

850

(embraces and kisses all round. Laughter and song heard off left)

Miss Skjære

Now what is that?

Anna

The students!

Lind

The quartet,

off to the mountains; how could I forget
to send apologies — ?

(the students enter left and remain standing by the entrance)

Student (to Lind)

We're punctual!

Mrs Halm

It's Lind you've come for then?

Miss Skjære

It would be cruel;

he's just now got engaged —

An Aunt

And so you see

he's can't go traipsing off, he isn't free.

Student

Engaged!

All the students

Congratulations!

Lind Thanks a lot.

Student (to his companions) That's sunk our singing tour, like as not!
What can we do — no tenor we can hire.

Falk (who enters right, in summer gear, with student cap, a rucksack and a stick)
I'll sing the part in Norway's blithe young choir! 860

Student You, Falk! Cheers!

Falk To the fells, God's nature's there,
that drives the bee to leave its winter lair!
I have a double sound-board in my breast,
a zither that's equipped with double stringing
that resonates, the *high*, with life and zest,
and one that's *lower*, keeps the bass notes ringing.
(to various students)
You have the palette? You've the sketch book, score?
Good; let us swarm the leafage while it's green,
bear home the pollen to the beehive's queen,
the mighty mother whom we all adore! 870
(to the assembled company, as the students leave, and the
chorus from Act I can be faintly heard outside.)
Forgive me my short-comings, great and small.
I shall not brood, (softly) but I'll remember all.

Strawman (beside himself with glee)
O fiddlesticks, joy's cup is still intact!
My wife's expecting, positively glowing.
(draws him aside to whisper)
The dear soul's just assured me, it's a fact —
(continues inaudibly for a moment)
thirteen by Michaelmas, the way it's going.

Styver (with Miss Skjære on his arm, turns towards Falk, smiles exultantly and says,
indicating the priest)
I've raised the cash, can settle down — all's clear —

Miss Skjære (curtseys ironically)
I'll shed my girlish dresses come next Yule.

Anna (follows suit as she take her fiancé's arm)
He may have promised, but my Lind stays here —

Lind (conceals his embarrassment)
I'll seek a post at some young ladies' school. 880

Mrs Halm I'll train young Anna in all kinds of lore —

Guldstad (gravely)
I'll start a poem, nothing grand, right now,
on someone's life pledged to a sacred vow.

Falk (with a smile for the whole company)
I'll seek out future's challenges — I'll soar!
Good-bye! (quietly to Svanhild)
God bless you, my spring-season's wife; —
you'll hear of me, where'er my quest may take me!
(waves his hat and follows the students)

Svanhild (follows him with her eyes for a moment and says, quietly but firmly)
Now I have finished with my outdoor life;
the leaves are falling; now the world can take me.

(At that moment the piano starts playing dance music and champagne corks pop in the background. The gentlemen circulate together with their ladies on their arms; Guldstad approaches Svanhild and bows; she starts, recovers and gives him her hand. Mrs Halm and the closest relatives, who have been observing the scene anxiously, rush towards them and surround them in high glee that is drowned by the music and merriment amongst the ladies further away in the garden.)

(But from far inland, and sounding above the dance music, there echoes, strongly and boldly:)

Chorus of Falk and the students

And though I have sailed my boat hard aground,
O, it was so grand to be sailing!

890

Those on stage Hurrah!

(dance and celebration; curtain)

Notes

ACT I

- 121 Knudsen's grammar: Knut Knudsen, a prominent member of a group working towards the standardisation of spelling in the three Scandinavian languages.
- 196 Some grief: The sentiment echoes those expressed in Ibsen's letter to Karl Anker, 30th July 1858.
- 271 William Russell: 'Lord William Russell', a tragedy by Andreas Munch, 1857. Ibsen was impressed by it because it depicted not gods but great human beings.
- 428 Akersdale, the valley in the eastern outskirts of Oslo through which the river Aker flows to enter the fjord near the ancient palace-fortress of Akershus.
- 449 Saga-King's Princess: The tragic death of Svanhild is told in the Volsungasaga.
- 483 Zacharias: Luke 1:5 tells the story of the elderly priest and his wife who, though barren, longed for a son. Because of Zacharias's belief in God, his prayer was answered and they begot a son, John the future Baptist. Svanhild suggests that the modern, faithless generation is unreasonable in demanding too much of an old, exhausted stock.
- 524 Exodus 21:24.
- 560 Galère: A quotation from the currently popular sixteenth century French poet Villon.

ACT II

- 119 Build on sand: Matt 7:26.
- 123 Offering: The Norwegian "offer" can mean both sacrifice and the collection made after a church service, hence the misunderstanding that follows.
- 371 Falk's translation of the Latin phrase "quot homines tot sententiae". (Terence, *Phormio*)
- 394 Methuselem: Ibsen's form of Methuselah.
- 414 Heavenly kingdom: China was known as the celestial kingdom (460).
- 495 Engagements were confirmed by the delivery of a ring in a small basket. The

receipt of a basket from which the bottom had been removed signified the end of an engagement.

508 Gardermoen: The military base and parade-ground north of Oslo.

683 Mat.XXVI:34 Jesus said unto [Peter] ... before the cock crow, thou shalt betray me thrice.

ACT III

24 Genesis 32:10 And Jacob said: for with my staff I passed over this Jordan.

66 Wingèd horse: Pegasus, the horse of the Muses.

365 At the invitation of the Duke, Goethe spent several years at the Court of Weimar, where he was saddled with a variety of official responsibilities — for agriculture, forestry, mining. He also had a seat in the Cabinet and was Chairman of the Treasury.

468 It is light: Matt 11:30 “and my burden is light”. The circumstances may suggest a further reference, to Genesis 11:24. [And Adam said] “Therefore shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife;”

598 Brabanter: In Holberg’s ‘Jacob Von Tyboe’ the protagonist, a version of Plautus’s miles gloriosus, boasts of his single-handed prowess at the siege of Brabant.

646 Probably St Gertrude of Nivelles, a life-long virgin who died young in 659. A body of folk-lore became attached to her name. Ibsen’s “golden glory” may refer solely to her iconographic representation but may also hint at the gift attributed to her of ensuring sunny weather at the planting season — hence her adoption as the patron saint of gardeners.

821 Janus, a god with two heads facing in different directions, the guardian of doorways and gates.

822 Montanus: The conceited, logic-chopping pedant in Holberg’s ‘Erasmus Montanus’ who, having quarrelled throughout the play with the peasants amongst whom he grew up as to whether the earth is round (as he maintains) or flat, is tricked into having to recant or be drafted for military service.