

# **Happiness**

**By Victoria Benedictsson**

Translated by Verne Moberg

## Happiness

Out there, across the garden, a brilliant autumn sun was shining. She had turned her head on the pillow to be able to look out on it.

It was a lean face, lying there; and the black hair, thin and cut short, accented further her skin's sickly pallor. Around her mouth rested an expression of weariness, her pale red lips were open a bit, and on both sides those needle-fine scratches appeared that pain burns into the skin. In sharp contrast to this was the clearly modeled forehead, the thick eyebrows looking unnaturally black, and the big dark blue eyes, which appeared even larger in the gaunt setting and looked out under the black brows with this expression of harsh, concentrated energy, that tends to be found in those who have suffered more than others.

On the dark red cover lay her hands, thin and tired. The entire network of veins could be seen as blue under the transparent white skin.

The air in the room was tepid, impregnated by the pungent smell of carbolic acid. The tile stove had been fired up in the morning, for although the days were warm and sunny, the nights had become chilly.

She stared out the window intently, and on her features was a faint shimmer of happiness, the kind one can see also in a face ravaged by experiences of suffering—as when the sun shines palely on the backwash after a storm.

It was not a tended garden with raked pathways and evenly clipped lawns, but a wild pasture, full of thickets and overgrown bushes, whose lush foliage took the sunshine unto itself and cast only deep shadows behind it. But in this vegetation there was something wild and powerful that appealed to her. Here were no traces of artifice; it was nature unfalsified in its healthy original style. The only visible trace of

human intervention was a group of dahlias tied to supports painted green. And they comforted her eye with their splendor of rich color: the purple velvet that turned to black, red as the clearest vermillion, yellow with nuances soft as canary down.

She loved this garden so, as one loves a living creature, a kindred being. This wild luxuriance was dear to her. Fifteen times she had seen it turn green and wither; and it had witnessed her life's struggle.

Desolate and quiet it lay there, shut off from the outer world by a row of spruce trees growing close together. Out there the field of vision was wide, where fresh winds blew, where the radiant sun shone; in here everything was narrow and closed off. Only in the treetops did the wind play, and the overgrown bushes obscured the sunlight. How many points of comparison it offered to her own life!

She had grown up like a savage. Her family's estate lay far from the main road, few persons of rank were in the vicinity, and one did not associate with those who were there. Her mother was a pietist, her father the exact opposite--a sound, lighthearted nature. They claimed that he was happy go lucky, but most forgave him this, for his careless demeanor was as lovable as a child's excesses.

Naturally, the parents did not sympathize. Each of them lived for themselves. Her mother lived on one side of the hallway, her father on the other. They never visited each other and had no common interest other than raising the child. It was a constant point of contention between them; for each wanted to bring her up according to his or her own principles.

But her father had the power; and in addition he had the daughter's sympathies for his method.

It was a healthy life they lived! On horseback she was as comfortable as a Cossack and with a revolver she hit the mark two times out of three.

And then the excursions they made together!

Rides on unpaved grounds—astride the saddle—galloping over mossy fences and grassy ditches—triumphant sails on a stormy sea—the foam seething at the stern. It was a splendid life!

And what dreams she dreamed!

She would have wanted to stab the knife into the tyrant's chest like Charlotte Corday, or take over the defense of a besieged castle and rescue it like Kristina Gyllenstjerna. Or maybe rather get involved in the thick of the battle like an ancient Amazon, to carry out a heroic deed and die. If only there was an idea so lofty it was worth it!

Then the Polish insurrection broke out. Poland's prayer of freedom resounded across the world and in millions of hearts kindled hatred for the oppressor and sympathy for the oppressed. The name Henriette Postowojtoff shone forth--the adjutant and lover of the insurgent general. What a wonderful life: brave deeds and love, courage and sacrifice. Oh, why couldn't she be there!

During this period she was made ready for her first communion.

One afternoon four fellows came with father's body between them on a bier. He had drowned during a hunt for a sea bird. . . .

Now another life began for her.

It did not occur without conflict, but her mother had a strong will that was kindled by her fanaticism to futile severity. And during the first acute grieving over her father's death, it was easier for her than it would have been otherwise to bend her daughter's will beneath her own. But an iron yoke would have been needed to keep her there.

However, she was kept there. After that time her life had been more cut off from the world than the garden was by its thick spruce hedge. And what a life!

Hymn singing and the reading of homilies, prayers to a god that she hated because they forced her in the presence of his face, conversation with repulsive peddlers, folded hands, eyes cast down to conceal how the aversion glowed inside there. Everything rising up in her young breast--where the age's breathless cry of freedom, of the individual's right, had reverberated--was stifled with brutal violence by a well-meaning hand.

In this way her first youth had passed. And then he had come--the liberator.

He was thirty some years older than she, had been married twice before, was known as a god-fearing and honorable man. There was no big fuss about it: the choice was not difficult of course between the unbearable life in the home and--freedom. She didn't know what a marriage was, and that was not a part of her mother's method of childrearing to tell her that. *He* taught her; but then she was bound for life.

A quality of bitterness appeared around her mouth when she thought about it.

For fifteen years they had lived together--fifteen long years!

There was a light knock on the door; it was opened, and the doctor came in.

He was blond and somewhat stocky, had his hair brushed back, blue eyes, and a yellow moustache and a goatee. A real Gustaf II Adolf type. He was also proud that during his study visit in Germany, they had taken note of this likeness; he had been pleased by it as a child.

Her glance turned toward him, and she tried to raise her head from the pillow to say hello, but it had to stop at a smile.

"How goes it?" he said, and took a seat on the edge of the bed. You haven't been able to get anything down, have you?"

She shook her head.

"But you're drinking your champagne?"

"Yes."

He put his hand around her emaciated wrist to feel the pulse beats; they were quick and faint.

"The clockwork is winding down," she said smiling.

He looked at her with admiration. He had never had such a patient before.

This anemic physical constitution seemed to possess remarkable resources when it came to suffering. It endured everything with unlimited patience, with a good humor that seemed inexhaustible.

There was no room whatever for quackery in his relationship with her; and when it was so, he always said outright: "This I don't understand." It was otherwise against the doctor's principles, for he considered unlimited confidence to be the best assistant to the art of doctoring. But with her it came completely natural to be honest; it was like speaking with a comrade.

How could that happen?

In her healthy days he had felt offended by the proud reserve, which at the time was the distinctive characteristic of her manner. They had met some time at dinner parties in the area, but had not exchanged many words.

Then she grew ill.

It began with an affliction to her knee, probably something with the nerves, a relapse after an acute case of chills. His art was not able to do anything; the pain grew worse. He suspected a periostitis with formation of pus, was thinking about an operation, but didn't dare. He was the sole physician in the locale and felt uncertain.

The need to have someone to talk with drove him to present his opinion on the matter to the sick woman herself. She was interested, seemed to understand him, and gradually it came to be that he could speak to her as to a fellow professional. She took everything so calmly, as if it concerned a complete stranger.

However, the pain grew worse, eating and sleeping were not possible, and she did not want to use morphine. It tormented him to see her suffer, precisely because she suffered so patiently, and he struggled against the disease with all the means available to him. Yet he could do little; he had no firm grounds and therefore considered it to be best to bide his time.

But she asked him to hurry the decision: anything would be preferable to the uncertainty; that was what consumed her strength.

Her energy encouraged him. She said she was prepared for the worst and gave him unlimited authorization to dare anything. He consulted a colleague who was of the same opinion as he: all the symptoms indicated pus formation and inflammation of the periosteum. He decided to dare an operation.

Three incisions he made with brief intervals—in vain. Finally there came what he had feared: at first carbolic poisoning and then erysipelas that slowly wandered upward. He fought it with growing success, but there wasn't much to go on. Her strength was nearly exhausted, and the little that remained was burned up by fever. Now there was almost no hope.

During the hideous illness with its years of sufferings, her manner had undergone a remarkable change. It was as if the most beautiful facets of her character had been honed by the suffering—as certain tropical flowers open their chalices only with the onset of twilight.

How could that happen?

She was glad, unreserved, and even-tempered. An approaching operation didn't seem to make the least impression on her, and only in an exceptional case could a turn of the knife blade or a firmly planted drainage tube cause subdued complaint. As soon as the antiseptic dressing was in place again, her face had also resumed its contented expression. It was as if she'd had an inexhaustible source of joy to dispense.

That was what surprised the good doctor. He could not see any reasonable grounds for explanation.

He himself was a sound nature, detested complaining and whining worse than the plague and could become really peevish and nasty to patients who moaned and "whimpered." That is why she was his favorite. He felt a kind of pride about her, and sometimes, when visitors came, he could exclaim: "Have you ever seen such an invalid! Why, she looks so happy, as if she were going to a ball this evening!" And then there was such a nice shine in her blue eyes.

"Well, Doctor," she said smiling, though with a bit out of breath, for the shortness of breath lay like a heavy burden on her breast. Generally it's not considered suitable to talk to a patient about death, but with me you can safely make an exception. How long do you think my frail constitution can continue to resist?"

He didn't answer, but took her hand, lying on the cover, and pressed it. This common struggle against death had made them close confidantes.

"Oh—Doctor—look out there!" With effort, she lifted her hand and pointed out to the garden. I think I've never seen anything so beautiful. But that's probably because I have to leave it now."

She leaned her head back on the pillow and looked up to the sky out there, ascending clear and shining blue. A swallow shot swift as an arrow through the space,

way high up. Its dark body pierced like a little dot against the sunny background, but with every flash of a turn, its breast shone white toward the light.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” she added in resignation. “Why, it was going to happen some day anyway...”

And in a whispering voice she continued: “How many live their lives out without having any idea how lovely it is to live. Merely to have seen a day like this, wouldn’t that compensate for everything else? I mean, if one had seen it with such an open mind, that the sunshine as it were streamed down to the bottom of one’s own soul. If only I could teach a single human to see as I do! Now it’s as if all of nature’s loveliness is to die with me—that’s the only thing that weighs upon me.

“But you mustn’t die now. Your energy could be kept up with musk and champagne, and a crisis must come. It will turn—to life or death—I hope that...”

She smiled a little.

“Ah, are you back to that again, with your cause for consolation! What good will that do? Why, I don’t have pain any more and am not afraid to die. You’ve said yourself that the worst is over.”

“Yes.”

“And you must be able to see on me that I’m just lying here enjoying it.”

The words were not contradicted by her glance, but on her pale forehead the cold sweat was breaking out in small gleaming drops.

“You’re talking too much,” he said.

“Let me speak! What difference does it make now? Why, I’ve been silent all my life.”

He looked at her, as if he had wanted to pose a question.

“But I have been happy,” she continued. “Do you know when?”

"No."

"Once—a long, long time ago, and then now."

"Now?"

"Yes, during my illness."

It was remarkable, how those large eyes gleamed! The doctor stroked his yellow goatee thoughtfully with his hand, and a thought flew hastily through his brain: Probably she would never be able--?

Experience had taught him that the Gustaf Adolf type was much appreciated by the ladies.

"There was a time when I thirsted for happiness," she began again, "and I thought that if only for one second I could be able to feel life as fully and richly as it must be possible to feel it—then I wanted to die."

"Well?"

"It never came."

There was heard almost as a sigh. She turned her head away and regarded the garden outside there for a moment.

When she turned toward him, this expression of happiness and peace was there again across her face.

"But I have learned to see," she said. "How lovely the world is anyhow! And I take in everything in one glance—all of nature's beauty. One must be content."

They both fell silent.

"You're a puzzle," he said finally.

"How so? Because I've been so glad all the time? Then don't you understand what the illness has given me?"

Once again the thought flew quick as lightning through his brain: Was she perhaps--? He didn't dare even complete it even in his mind.

"What could it give?"

"What was everything to me, that I had been longing for all my life—freedom."

Now he understood. At once it came over him as an oppressive feeling. How bitter life must have been for her, who could say that a year of suffering had given her everything!

There was a long pause.

"If I had told you this before, you would not have believed me. Now I'm going to die: perhaps that's why you're doing it."

"I don't know. I understand only halfway."

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The twilight fell, deeper and deeper. There was no other sound heard but her arduous breathing. She was asleep.

Now she is in her childhood home again, sitting before the tile stove in her father's room. The fire has burned down, and only a few dying embers are still gleaming in the hearth. It is so dark and quiet—so awful.

Lurking steps behind her—she turns around. Who is it? Oh, she knows him, this dark figure—the man of god with the insidious leer—the vampire. She wants to get up but is as if stuck fast to the chair—the hairy arms embrace her breast, while a couple of clawed hands constricted her throat. She struggles against it—fights. Her chest works violently. Just one single breath—one—single—cry—

"Father!"

It came half-stifled, desperate. She woke herself up with it. Oh, why it was just her shortness of breath!

However, the door was opened, and Märta came in with a candle.

“Get me up—I’m suffocating! Her forehead was bathed in sweat.

Märta laid her strong arm around her shoulders and raised her up. For a few seconds she sat that way panting heavily, but it soon passed over.

“The Mrs. is doing very poorly.” Said Märta, as she put the candle on a table and prepared to light the lamp.

“Yes-s-s.”

“The Mrs. will probably die soon.”

“That may well happen.”

“And then a body will be without a position!”

It came so comically, unanticipated. The invalid smiled a bit.

“Dear Märta, naturally you will stay on.”

“No, not one day longer, for the Mrs. has been the only one here in the house who’s been somewhat partial to me, so I won’t stay one day longer than till the twenty-fourth. ‘Cause it’s to the Mrs. I’ve got attached, not to anybody else. And when the Mrs. won’t be around, then there’ll never be any order to anything, for the Mrs. has been the only one who cared about the family, whatever a person has done for the house. And I’ll never forget how good the Mrs. has been to me—‘cause the Mrs. has been like a mother.”

Märta had spoken so beautifully that she felt moved, and the tears started running down her cheeks.

“Do you want to abandon me now, when I need you most. It’s not certain that I will die before the twenty-fourth.” A bitter little smile came to her lips at the last words, so that the sharp lines by her mouth were harshly and clearly marked.

“But then a body won’t have a position!” At this sorrowful prospect Märta burst into uncontrollable crying.

“And a body who doesn’t have anything but what one will earn,” she continued, while her whole strong body was shaken by sobs, “that one will probably have to drudge away for whatever they get. And I’ll never again have a mistress like the Mrs. here on earth—and maybe not in heaven either—but I can’t walk around here and watch everything go wrong! Now I’m offered two hundred crowns, and that’s swell money anyway—and if the Mrs. dies, then I won’t get one jot more than my wages, for the mister doesn’t understand any more about such than my old shoe.”

“You don’t need to move on that account.”

Märta wiped her face with her coarse sooty kitchen apron, so it left black halter marks around her eyes: “Well—anybody who doesn’t have anything but what they earn—”

“I have money. I will write that upon my death you’ll get two hundred crowns. Do you want to stay?”

Now the stream of tears broke out again.

“No, I can never accept that, for the Mrs. has been much too good to me, and I can never pay the Mrs. back.”

“Yes, you can stay on and care for me, as you’ve done till now.”

Märta dried her eyes with a resolute stroke. There was a shining in them for a moment.

“But you can’t write, Mrs., as poorly as you are. Don’t even think about; it’s much too crazy.”

“Take paper and a pen—you see it there—dip the pen first—and raise me up then.”

Märta was exceptionally eager—dipped the pen, took out a sheet of paper, laid a portfolio on the sick woman’s knee and got her up. While she wrote, the maid supported her with a steadfast grip on her shoulders.

For a moment nothing was heard but the sound of the pen’s scratching. Märta attentively followed the slithering, uncertain style with her eyes.

“There! Now give this to the master, when I am dead, and I know he will let you have the money.”

She sank back on the pillow, totally exhausted.

Märta stood turning the paper, with a radiant expression. Two hundred crowns—why, that was marvelous anyhow!

Hastily she bent down, gripped the hand of the sick woman, and kissed it. After that she lit the lamp and put it on the night table beside the bed.

The lampshade gathered the light and cast it, augmented, into a circle around itself. It was reflected in light gray highlights on her black hair, fell over the sick one’s face, and made one cheek glisten white as ivory, while the shadows around the sunken eyes and around the mouth came forth even more sharply. On the table stood the emptied champagne glass, a perfume bottle, and a couple of other things. In them the rays of light were broken into a mass of restlessly sparkling points. Just beyond, in the shadow, lay a black bound book with brown leather spine and a red strip on the back.

The whole room was otherwise enveloped in semidarkness. In one corner over by the tile stove Märta had settled comfortably. She was still sitting thumbing the paper. She could not sleep, she was so happy.

Over the face of the sick person lay the usual expression of happiness and peace. A fine little smile indicated happy thoughts or—could it perhaps be from compassion?

She thought of her good old Märta. Her avarice had been so unvarnished, her joy so open; and she was too much of a child of nature to conceal it, though she was standing next by a deathbed.

It was interesting for once to see a human being without a mask. Now no illusions came off with it.

The strong feelings had made her so instinctively true, the good Märta. She had shown who was her first priority. If only all people did this!

Then the gilt facade of lies would no longer shine so brightly over the skeleton. It would feel hard in the beginning for the weak not to have anything to believe in. But in time a stronger race would be fostered, and in the long run humanity would gain by it.

Of course it was quite natural, that the ultimate object for all humans' acts must be their own ego. For the outer world has no meaning to her exactly in its relationship to her own self. One could give examples. That a mother sacrifices her life for her child, what is that but an expression of unreflected instinct for self-preservation? To lose the child would be worse for her than death.

The martyr, who writhed in torment at the stake, had of course all of heaven's bliss in perspective, all that a romantic soul could dream beautiful.

Why should one grieve over her death? Possibly because she no longer existed? No, to die was beautiful, and her life was no loss. But because she no longer would exist *for them*. A little vacuum in their lives—for a time. That was all.

How many times had she not woken at night and been met by the husband's staring, watery gray-blue eyes. He could sit there for hours and watch over her. It was, as if he feared that she would run away while he slept.

Out there in the world he was considered to be so self-sacrificing. What had he actually sacrificed?

Nothing! He had wrecked her whole life; now he was doing everything to keep her from dying. He didn't even want to resign himself to the insignificant pain that her death would cause him. And yet he knew that it was a matter of her happiness. And yet he knew well that the emptiness would last only a short while. Of course it was actually merely the remains of his tenderness that he had cast upon her. Twice before he had been in love—she smiled when she thought of the word—and comforted herself.

"Give me the book there!"

Märta got up from her half slumber over there. She rubbed her eyes, blinking at the light, and as she cast a distrusting glance at the book, she said: "Is it a godly book?"

"No!"

"Ack, the Mrs. should have other things to think about now than humor books—the Mrs. should read God's word."

The voice was pathetic as that of a fundamentalist preacher, and the serious, devout expression that she found too good to accept, contrasted so ridiculously to the

halter marks of soot on her coarse face. Reluctantly she reached out to her with the book as she thoughtfully shook her head.

“For me this book does just as much good as a sermon for you,” said the invalid with a little smile.

“But the Mrs. should think of her soul—”Märta’s tone revealed that this was merely the introduction to a longer sermon, but her mistress interrupted her.

“You can go to bed now.”

This argument seemed as calming to Märta’s concern for her mistress’s soul as a written guarantee that the sins of both would be forgiven. She left.

It grew quiet in the room—soundlessly quiet. The sick woman closed her eyes and surrendered to the pleasant feeling of rest in this stillness, this soft silence that numbed down all the thoughts, wrapping them in its light veil. The humming of the lamp’s wick sounded like faraway music, a fine, sensitive accompaniment that lulled her sick thoughts to rest.

From the next room the husband’s snores began to be heard through the thin wall. They cut rudely into the mood, drew her thoughts from their rest, dragged them by the hair from their calm refuge

She opened the book and started to read.

It was J. P. Jacobsen’s *Niels Lyhne*.

She loved it nervously, frenziedly—the way a mother loves most the child no one else cares about—loved it all the more because she knew herself to be one of the few who understood it.

She read now about Niels Lyhne’s end. He lay there with the fatal bullet in his chest, so calm, so impressively calm; and inside him appeared live images of all the

glories life had given him: the beach forests of Zealand, the pure mountain air in Clarens—the soft evening breeze of Lake Garda.

“But when he thought of the human beings, he became so sick again in his mind. He called them to him one by one, and all of them passed him by and left him alone, and not one “stayed behind”

She let the book fall and closed her eyes a moment. She too employed the same scrutiny—and with the same result. They all passed her by, well-known figures who had played a role in her life’s drama—everything from childhood to the present at death’s twilight—no matter how near for one moment they had been to her heart—they all passed her by and left her alone—alone—”

She opened her eyes again and read: “. . .It was the great sadness, that a soul is always alone. It was a lie, every belief in a merging between soul and soul: not the mother who took one from her womb, not a friend, not the wife who rested by one’s heart.”

She felt it living now: it *was* a lie. At least she had always felt alone.

It was said that Jacobsen depicted in dark colors—and yet—had not Niels Lyhne’s life been splendid compared to hers. He had however had his Gerda—let be that she failed him in the end out of fear for the great unknown—but before that!

What had she had?

A husband whom she loathed, who did not understand her, and for whom she had been nothing but an object for his burning desire—to whose caresses she had had to yield, while her soul was upset by disgust and nausea.

How many nights had she not, even during the days of her health, lain awake as now, bit her pillow to stifle her sobs—while at her side she heard him snore regularly, soullessly like an animal.

It was her life's misfortune that she had married an old man whom she believed to be without passions. She had sold herself without knowing *what* she was selling. And the price had been so tempting: freedom. But she had been infamously betrayed.

Now it was over. That calming thought returned.

She continued reading: the scene between Hjerrild and Lyhne, the sound doubter and the dying one, who stuck so steadfastly to his doubt that to him it became a faith in which he dared to die. She saw Hjerrild there inside her room, leaning against the windowsill and with his gaze turned toward the heavens, glittering with stars.

“‘If I were God,’ he mumbled, and in his thoughts he continued: ‘then I would much rather bless him who doesn’t convert in the end.’”

She felt in this moment an irrepressible pride over being among those who would populate Hjerrild's heaven. At least no little soul could enter there.

The book fell out of her dull hands down on the cover, her eyes closed.

The lamplight fell sharply across her face, from which the sleep had chased any trace of weariness. Gone were all the weighty thoughts, every sensation. Whether of joy or sorrow. It was like never having existed, never having fought life's battle, never having suffered its sorrows.

No torments, no unsatisfied longing—no consciousness of an invalid's endlessly long night. An eternity and one second—just as long.

Hour after hour passed, the sun was heralded by a faint, foggy morning dawn that began to vie with the lamplight. And life awoke out there.

The sparrows began their hoarse, unmelodic twitter, and from the yard was heard a coarse man's voice singing a popular ballad. The watchdog looked out of its

house, with the sleep still in its eyes, waving its tail at the dairy maid who went to milk the cows.

And the sun rose higher and higher and woke all the creatures to life—except the ones the frost had ravaged.

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