

THE CONFESSION OF A FOOL

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The Confession of a Fool by August Strindberg

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AUGUST STRINDBERG

**THE CONFESSION
OF A FOOL**

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BY AUGUST STRINDBERG

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PT
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1913

Translated from the "Litterarisches Echo,"

August 15, 1911

STRINDBERG'S WORKS
(BY I. E. PORITZKY, BERLIN)

THE republication of *The Confession of a Fool* represents the last link in the chain of Strindberg's autobiographical novels. A German version of the book was published as far back as 1893, but it was mutilated, abbreviated, corrupted, and falsified to such an extent that the attorney-general, misled by the revolting language, blamed the author for the misdeeds of the translator and prohibited the sale of the book. This was a splendid advertisement for this profound work, but there were many who would have rejoiced if the translation had been completely ignored. It distorted Strindberg's character and was the cause of many prejudices which exist to this day.

Schering's new translation is an attempt to make reparation for this crime. "It is impossible," he says, "that any attorney-general can now doubt the high morality of this book." Strindberg himself has called it a *terrible book*, and has regretted that he ever wrote it. He has never published it in Swedish, his own language, because not only is it too personal in character, but it also revealed a still bleeding wound. It contains the relentless description of his first marriage, so superbly candid an account, that one is reminded of the last testament of a man for whom death has no longer any terror. We know from his fascinating novel *Separated*, how painful the burden was which he had to

bear, and how terribly he suffered during the period of his first marriage. So much so, indeed, that he had to write this book before he could face the thought of death with composure. Doubtless, a man for whom life holds no longer any charm would give us a genuinely truthful account of his inner life, and there is no denying that a book which takes its entire matter from the inner life is of vastly greater importance and on an immeasurably higher level than a million novels, be they written ever so well. The great importance of *The Confession of a Fool* lies in the fact that it depicts the struggle of a highly intellectual man to free himself from the slavery of sexuality, and from a woman who is a typical representative of her sex.

Apart from this, it is an intense joy from an artistic point of view to follow the "confessor" through the book, as he looks at himself from all sides in order to gain self-knowledge; that he conceals nothing from us, not even those deep secrets which he would fain keep even in the face of death. One sees Strindberg brooding over his own soul to fathom its depths. He plumbs its hidden profoundnesses, he takes to pieces the inner wheels of his mechanism, so as to know for himself and to show us how he is made and what is the cause of the instinct which drives him to confess and to create. He opens wide his heart and lets us see that he carries in his breast his heaven and also his horrible hell. We see angels and devils fighting in his soul for supremacy, and the divine in him stepping between them with its creative
Let there be!

THE CONFESSION OF A FOOL

PART I

I

It was on the thirteenth of May, 1875, at Stockholm.

I well remember the large room of the Royal Library which extended through a whole wing of the Castle, with its beechen wainscoting, brown with age like the meer-schaum of a much-used cigar-holder. The enormous room, with its rococo beadings, garlands, chains and armorial bearings, round which, at the height of the first floor, ran a gallery supported by Tuscan columns, was yawning like a great chasm underneath my feet; with its hundred thousand volumes it resembled a gigantic brain, with the thoughts of long-forgotten generations neatly arranged on shelves.

A passage running from one end of the room to the other divided the two principal parts, the walls of which were completely hidden by shelves fourteen feet high. The golden rays of the spring sun were falling through the twelve windows, illuminating the volumes of the Renaissance, bound in white and gold parchment, the black morocco bindings mounted with silver of the seventeenth century, the red-edged volumes bound in calf of a hundred years later, the green leather bindings which were the fashion under the Empire, and the cheap covers of our own time. Here theologians were on neighbourly terms with apostles of magic, philosophers hobnobbed

with naturalists, poets and historians dwelt in peace side by side. It reminded one of a geological stratum of unfathomable depth where, as in a puddingstone, layer was piled upon layer, marking the successive stages arrived at by human folly or human genius.

I can see myself now. I had climbed on to the encircling gallery, and was engaged in arranging a collection of old books which a well-known collector had just presented to the library. He had been clever enough to ensure his own immortality by endowing each volume with his *ex-libris* bearing the motto "Speravit infestis."

Since I was as superstitious as an atheist, this motto, meeting my gaze day after day whenever I happened to open a volume, had made an undeniable impression on me. He was a lucky fellow, this brave man, for even in misfortune he never abandoned hope. . . . But for me all hope was dead. There seemed to be no chance whatever that my drama in five acts, or six tableaux, with three transformation scenes on the open stage, would ever see the footlights. Seven men stood between me and promotion to the post of a librarian—seven men, all in perfect health, and four with a private income. A man of twenty-six, in receipt of a monthly salary of twenty crowns, with a drama in five acts stowed away in a drawer in his attic, is only too much inclined to embrace pessimism, this apotheosis of scepticism, so comforting to all failures. It compensates them for unobtainable dinners, enables them to draw admirable conclusions, which often have to make up for the loss of an overcoat, pledged before the end of the winter.

Notwithstanding the fact that I was a member of a learned Bohemia, which had succeeded an older, artistic Bohemia, a contributor to important newspapers and excellent, but badly paying magazines, a partner in a society founded for the purpose of translating Hartmann's

Philosophy of the Unconscious, a member of a secret federation for the promotion of free love, the bearer of the empty title of a "royal secretary," and the author of two one-act plays which had been performed at the Royal Theatre, I had the greatest difficulty to make ends meet. I hated life, although the thought of relinquishing it had never crossed my mind; on the contrary, I had always done my best to continue not only my own existence but also that of the race. It cannot be denied that pessimism, misinterpreted by the multitude and generally confused with hypochondria, is really a quite serene and even comforting philosophy of life. Since everything is relatively nothing, why make so much fuss, particularly as truth itself is mutable and short-lived? Are we not constantly discovering that the truth of yesterday is the folly of to-morrow? Why, then, waste strength and youth in discovering fresh fallacies? The only proven fact is that we have to die. Let us live then! But for whom? For what purpose? Alas! . . .

When Bernadotte, that converted Jacobite, ascended the throne and all the rubbish which had been discarded at the end of the last century was re-introduced, the hopes of the generation of 1860, to which I belonged, were dashed to the ground with the clamorously advertised parliamentary reform. The *two houses*, which had taken the place of the *four estates*, consisted for the greater part of peasants. They turned Parliament into a sort of town council, where everybody, on the best of terms with everybody else, looked after his own little affairs, without paying the least regard to the great problems of life and progress. Politics were nothing more nor less than a compromise between public and private interests. The last remnants of faith in what was then "the ideal" were vanishing in a ferment of bitterness. To this must be added the religious reaction which marked the period