

NIELS LYHNE

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Niels Lyhne by J. P. Jacobsen & Hanna Astrup Larsen

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BY

J. P. JACOBSEN

TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH

BY HANNA ASTRUP LARSEN



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Introduction

TO the student of Jens Peter Jacobsen's life and works, *Niels Lyhne* has a value apart from its greatness as literature from the fact that it is the book in which the author recorded his own spiritual struggles and embodied the faith on which he came, finally, to rest his soul in death as in life. It tells of his early dreams and ideals, his efforts to know and to achieve, his revolt against the dream-swathed dogmas in which people take refuge from harsh reality, and his brave acceptance of what he conceived to be the truth, however dreary and bitter.

The person of the hero is marked for a self-portrait by the description, "Niels Lyhne of Lönborggaard, who was twenty-three years old, walked with a slight stoop, had beautiful hands and small ears, and was a little timid,"—though friends of Jacobsen's youth declare that "a little timid" was far from describing the excessive shyness from which he suffered. He himself would sometimes joke about his "North Cimbrian heaviness," for like Niels Lyhne he was a native of Jutland, where the people are more sluggish than the sprightly islanders. Like him, again, he had a mother who kept alive her romantic spirit in rather humdrum, prosaic surroundings, and who instilled into her son's mind from childhood the idea that he was to be a poet. It is Jacobsen's own youthful ideal speaking through

Niels Lyhne's mouth when he says: "Mother—I am a poet—really—through my whole soul. Don't imagine it's childish dreams or dreams fed by vanity. . . . I *shall* be one of those who fight for the greatest, and I promise you that I shall not fail, that I shall always be faithful to you and to my gift. Nothing but the best shall be good enough. No compromise, mother! When I weigh what I've done and feel that it isn't sterling, or when I hear that it's got a crack or a flaw—into the melting-pot it goes! Every single work must be my best!"

✓ Niels Lyhne never wrote the poems he had fashioned in his mind. On the intellectual side of his nature he remained always a dreamer, floundering around in a slough of doubt and self-analysis. Edvard Brandes, in his introduction to J. P. Jacobsen's letters,¹ calls attention to "the place dreams occupy in this book, which begins with the childish fancies of the three boys, in which the mother dreams with her son of the future and of distant lands, while Edele dreams her love, and Bigum dreams his genius and his passion—he who is put into the novel as a tragic caricature of Niels Lyhne himself, as he goes about dreaming, in the midst of people and yet far away from them. In his youth, Niels Lyhne never attained to anything but dreams of great deeds and of love. . . . Read *Niels Lyhne*, and

¹ *Breve fra J. P. Jacobsen, Med et Forord udgivet af Edvard Brandes.*

on almost every page you will find the word *dream!* Read about Niels Lyhne's mother who 'dreamed a thousand dreams of those sunlit regions, and was consumed with longing for this other and richer self, forgetting — what is so easily forgotten — that even the fairest dreams and the deepest longings do not add an inch to the stature of the human soul,' and who goes on dreaming because 'a life soberly lived, without the fair vice of dreams, was no life at all.' "

In his strictures on dreams and dreamers Jacobsen scourged his own sluggish temperament, and the story of Niels Lyhne's futile efforts is in part the record of the author's own youth. From the time he was ten years old, he tells us, his one sure dogma was that he was to be a poet, and there must have been years of his boyhood and early manhood when he was haunted by visions of what he wanted to write without being able to frame it in a form satisfactory to himself. He was almost twenty-five years old when his first story, *Mogens*, appeared, in 1872, and after that his other short stories followed only at intervals of years. It is true, he was by no means idle. He won distinction as a botanist; he introduced Darwin to the Scandinavian reading public by translations and magazine articles, and he familiarized himself with the literature not only of Denmark, but of England, France, Germany, and Italy. He had a theory that any one aspiring to produce creative literature ought to know what had been

written by great minds before him, and we recognize himself in the picture of Niels Lyhne restlessly trying to absorb all the knowledge and wisdom of the ages while he felt like a child trying to dip out the ocean in his hollow hand.

✓ Unlike Niels Lyhne, who never formed in his own image the clay he had carted together for his Adam, Jacobsen shaped his material in the image of the vision that had taken possession of him at the inception of his idea. Though execution always cost him an agonizing effort, he did not shirk it, and though he worked four years on each of his two novels, *Marie Grubbe* and *Niels Lyhne*, he never lost sight of his goal. The truth is that, however much he might abuse his own slothfulness—which was due largely to failing health—Jacobsen had a slow, deep strength by virtue of which he managed to write his immortal works.

✓ Niels Lyhne, too, had a kind of strength and was essentially sound though a dreamer. So we see him, when every relation of life was dissolved, when friend and mistress had thrown him back upon himself, gathering himself together in a resolve to find a place in his old home and make it a fixed point in his hitherto aimless existence. There, at last, he tasted life in its fullness, and by an effort of the finest, purest will made his short married life an experience of such beauty that the description, so moving in its simplicity, is one of the most exquisite things

Jacobsen ever wrote. He, too, mastered life, though not in the sense of which he had dreamed. The solution of his hero's problem is perhaps a compromise on Jacobsen's part; he did not want to drop his other self as a mere failure, but shrank from picturing him as the fêted and admired author he himself became in the latter years of his life.

In this connection, it may not be out of place to state briefly that Niels Lyhne's love affairs are drawn entirely from the imagination. On this point we have the positive evidence of Edvard Brandes and the negative testimony of Jacobsen's own letters. Even if he had experienced the great love for which he longed at the same time as he shrank from it, poverty and ill health would have prevented his marriage. His fine rectitude and horror of doing anything that might hurt another human being kept him from questionable adventures.

The revolt of his hero from the accepted religion of his day is in accord with Jacobsen's own development. The word "atheism," which falls on our ears with a dead sound, meant to him a revolt against fallacious dreams. He believed that the evangelical religion as taught in Denmark at the time had become a soft mantle in which people wrapped themselves against the bracing winds of truth. As a scientist he refused to accept the facile theory that a Providence outside of man would somehow juggle away the consequences of wrongdoing. The doc-

trine that immunity could be bought by repentance seemed to him a cheap attempt to escape the bitter and wholesome fruit of experience. To our modern consciousness, there is no reason why his sense of the sacredness of law should have driven him away from all religion—it might rather have driven him to a truer conception of Him who said of Himself that He came to fulfil the law—but in this respect he was the child of his day.

For himself, Jacobsen resolved that illness, suffering, and death should not make him accept in weakness the religion that his sober judgment in the fullness of his strength had rejected. Niels Lyhne's death "in armor" foreshadowed his own, and was perhaps written to steel himself for the ordeal he knew to be approaching. His refusal to lean on any spiritual power outside of his own soul lends an added sadness to the stoicism of his death, which took place in his home in Thisted, in 1885.

In the above paragraphs I have attempted only to sketch the relation of *Niels Lyhne* to Jacobsen's own life. For a brief estimate of his position in Northern literature I will refer the reader to my introduction to *Marie Grubbe*, SCANDINAVIAN CLASSICS, VII.

The translation of an author who, as Edvard Brandes says, "worshipped the word," and who believed that there never was more than one word