

Anna Svärd

by

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Afterword by Linda Schenck

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Never could Adrian Löwensköld, that fine gentleman, owner of Hedeby manor, who was always improving and beautifying his home and his property, that just master who did his best to make all those who worked for him happy, never could he rid himself of the feeling that he had offended his country, his forefathers and all of humanity by having given the world nothing but five daughters and no son, not a single diligent worker of the kind who, in times past, had aided Sweden's struggle for greatness and power. In spite of his efforts to be fair and not to put the blame on anyone innocent, he could not help feeling that life was repugnant now that he had nothing but female company to spend it with. He did know that neither his wife nor his old aunt nor his five daughters nor their nursery maid was the cause of his unhappiness. And yet every day he joined their company only to spoil their pleasure, unable to forgive them for not surrounding him, rather than with quiet, modest women, with a band of mischievous, noisy, ravenous young scamps.

This constant disgruntlement made him old before his time. There was really very little left in him of the merry young gentleman who had once upon a time married that renowned beauty, Marianne Sinclair. It was said that he lost a sizeable portion of the happiness of his youth when Marianne died after a single year of marriage. His second, to the wealthy Miss Wachthausen from Kymmelssta, had been a marriage of convenience, and as his wife she was unable to rein in his all-consuming yearning. But his old, powerful *joi*

de vivre would undoubtedly have returned if only he had had a son. The two of them would have gone hunting or taken long fishing expeditions. As in his lighthearted youth, he would once again have traveled all day for the pleasure of dancing all night. Instead, however, he tramped his property, bored to death with all the delicate, small-minded femininity he encountered everywhere he turned.

One day, however, just when Baron Adrian's heart was hardening irrevocably, his brother Göran, a pathetic, scorned vagrant who had made himself the object of the animosity of the entire family, drove his sledge up to the main entrance of Hedeby manor.

This was unheard of. This peculiar, disreputable man, who lived amongst tinkers and horse traders and was married to a gypsy woman, often appeared at other manors in the area with his filthy trap full of rags, children, and all kinds of foul bundles, to trade horses or buy junk. But never before had he dared to darken his brother's doorstep.

It is not easy to determine the extent to which the life Göran Löwensköld had been living had wiped the past out of his memory.

For several days there had been terrible snowstorms, and as his sad little dun nag slowly made its way through the drifts in the lane leading up to Hedeby, the poor rogue baron may have been dreaming his way back to younger days. Perhaps he was imagining that he was once again a lad on his way home from school in Karlstad, and perhaps he was even expecting his two handsome parents to be waiting at the door to welcome him. He was thinking about how the servants would come rushing out to the sledge to free him from foot furs and animal hides. Eager hands would remove his fur coat and the cap from his head, and unbuckle his tall boots. His mother would be waiting impatiently for his outer garments to come off so she could embrace him, lead him to the hearth, pour him some scalding hot coffee and finally sit next to him, quite still, just taking him in.

Everyone knows that during the winter, when the snowstorms follow one another day after day after day,

when all the roads are blocked and no one dares undertake a journey, the windows of the isolated manor houses in the countryside are seldom void of curious lookouts who never tire of gazing down the lane, waiting for something new, something impossible, something – who knew what?

On such days the arrival of even a sledge carrying vagrants is a great event, reported from room to room, and so while the little dun nag was struggling up the lane Baron Adrian had already been informed of the name of the approaching visitor.

And still – as he stepped into the doorway with his most dismissive frown and was about to greet his brother in such a way that he would neither dare to make a joke nor to contradict him, he saw that Göran, the idler he held in such contempt, the prodigal son, who had brought down disgrace and damage upon him all his life, had not arrived this time in the company of black-eyed vagrant children or shameless beggar women, but with the very thing he wished for more than anything, and that had been denied to the faithful and just man he was.

And the child this careworn vagrant with the haggard jailbird face had with him amongst the bundles and sacks in his trap was no bogus child. In fact he bore a very close resemblance to the portrait of Baron Adrian's father that hung in state over the sofa in the drawing room at Hedeby. He recognized the soft, fine-featured face with its large dreamy eyes he had so often admired. So not only did his brother have a son, he was a beggar child blessed with the beauty inherited from his maternal ancestors, of which his own daughters had not inherited a drop.

But at that very moment the last of the Löwenskölds was not up to much. When he was lifted out of the sledge, he lay in his father's arms semi-conscious, his eyes sunken and his hands and cheeks frostbitten.

And so Baron Adrian did not follow his intention to send his brother packing with a few rough words. No, when his brother approached with the child in his arms and a tentative question lingering in his eyes, Baron Adrian forgot all the

suffering he had been put through on his brother's account as well as all the worry his brother had caused their parents, and he opened the door wide to him.

Göran Löwensköld, however, refused to go any further in than the vestibule, and when his brother went on to open the drawing room door and he saw the bright fire in the fireplace and the furniture and the wallpaper, all of which he recognized from childhood, he stood still, shaking his head.

'No,' he said, 'that is not for me. I will go no further. But if you would consider taking in the child?'

Baron Adrian accepted the child as the most precious of treasures and began at once to rub and massage the little body to warm it. He did not call out to any of the womenfolk for help. He was of course aware that he would eventually have to do so, but for these first few minutes he wanted the child to be his and his alone. And suddenly he put his whiskered cheek up against the cold, dirty one of the little beggar child in a bashful caress.

'He looks so much like Father,' he said, a note of hesitation in his voice. 'You are fortunate, Göran, in having a son.'

When Baron Göran saw how his brother pressed the child to his chest, he ought to have known that the owner of Hedeby manor would have been prepared to give his brother room and board until his last breath simply because he was fortunate enough to have a son. He ought to have known that from that moment on his brother would tolerate his mockery, his sloth, his card playing, his drinking without ever again raising his voice in criticism.

And yet he did not seem to have the slightest desire to stay, but rather moved back toward the front door.

'I'm sure you'll understand that I would not have come here if I had had a choice,' he said. 'We've been traveling through the snowstorm for so long I was afraid he might freeze to death on me. I had to bring him here or it would have been the end of him. I have work awaiting me at the parsonage, so I'll be off. I'll come and collect him once the storm is over.'

He stood there with his hand on the doorknob as he said these words. Baron Adrian gave him no direct reply. Perhaps

he had not even heard his brother's words. He was completely preoccupied with the child.

'Listen, Göran, his hands are frostbitten. We need to rub them with snow. Could you bring some in please?'

Göran Löwensköld mumbled something indistinct that might have been thank you and goodbye, and opened the door. Baron Adrian thought he was going out to get snow as he had requested. But a moment later he heard a sleigh bell, and when he looked out he saw his brother departing. He was striking the poor dun creature with his whip, making it set off at full speed, the light, powdery snow blowing around the sledge like a cloud of dust.

It was understandable to Baron Adrian that there were many aspects of their home that were painful for his brother to reencounter, and he was not surprised to see him take flight. Aside from that, his head was full of nothing but the child. He went outside himself and brought in snow to rub some life back into the frostbitten little face and hands, and while he was completing this task he began shaping plans for the future. There was no chance that he would allow the last of the Löwenskölds to be returned to his brother and grow up among wild companions.

It is not easy to say what Göran Löwensköld had in mind as he departed from Hedeby. Possibly he intended to return in a few hours to collect the child and at the same time take the opportunity to bask in his brother's rage at once again having allowed himself to be deceived and deluded. Even as he drove away from the estate he was laughing loudly at the thought of his brother laying his cheek against that of the beggar child, and of the pride with which he lifted this new bearer of their name and their lineage in his arms.

But somehow the laughter stuck in his throat. He sat there with his threadbare fur cap pulled down nearly to his eyes, traveling the road without a thought of where he was going. Deep, remarkable thoughts possessed him, thoughts demanding to be put immediately into action.

He did not travel to the parsonage at Bro as he had said he would, and the next morning when a messenger from

Hedeby arrived there to ask for him, no one at Bro had any information. Later that morning, however, two farmers who had been out clearing the road of snowdrifts arrived at Hedeby and informed the baron that his brother, the tramp, had been found dead in a roadside ditch. He had driven into the ditch in the dark, and his sledge had overturned. It seemed he had not been able to right it himself, and so had lain at the bottom of the ditch and frozen to death.

Nowhere was it easier, in the dark and in a snowstorm, to lose track of the road than on the flat plains around Bro church. It did not at all seem impossible that Göran Löwensköld, the rogue baron, had fallen victim to an accident.

There was absolutely no reason to believe that he had voluntarily sought death in order for his child to be kept on in the fine refuge he had arranged for him at a moment when his usual, cruel sense of humor had taken the upper hand.

The man, Göran Löwensköld, was nearly out of his mind, and it is certainly not easy to explain his behavior. But everyone knew that this child, his youngest, had been the object of his special affection. He had noted the Löwensköld features in the child's face, and he must have experienced the child as his in a way he had not the other black-eyed vagrant children who had grown up around him. It is not utterly inconceivable that he had sacrificed his life to protect this child from poverty and misery.

When he drove up to Hedeby he may not have had anything in mind beyond playing a joke on his fine gentleman of a brother, who was pining for sons. But the moment he entered his old home, he had felt integrity, security and good will rushing at him, and said to himself that what he wanted was for his youngest child, this child who was the only one who was completely his own, to be able to stay there, and so he had to arrange his journey so that he would never have to return to collect the child.

But no one knows how things really were. Life was probably not dear enough to him that he hesitated to reject it. Perhaps he had long cherished a wish that could now be fulfilled. Perhaps he was pleased to have ultimately found a reason

to do what he had been postponing out of indifference or apathy.

And who knows? Perhaps at the very moment of his death he was still pleased to be playing a trick on his only brother, who had always been so good at staying on the right side of life, a final trick. Perhaps it gave him satisfaction to deceive him one last time. Perhaps his lips sneered wryly one final time at the thought that the child he had put into his brother's arms was nothing but a girl, and that a disguise was all that had been needed to open the doors of his patrimonial home to the wretched little lass.

THE BARONESS

The day the rogue baron left his child at Hedeby, Baron Adrian Löwensköld came to the dinner table in high spirits.

Finally he would not have to sit with only women. Today there was a boy at the table, too. He felt that the air in the room was different. He felt young, cheerful, invigorated. Indeed, he even planned to suggest to his wife that they have some wine brought in so they could raise their glasses to the new arrival.

He went straight to his own seat at the round dining table, clasped his hands and listened, head raised, to grace being said by the youngest of his little daughters.

Once seated, he grinned, looking around the table, searching for his nephew. But however hard he tried, he could not see a single child in a jacket and trousers. There was nothing but skirts and tight bodices at the table, as always.

He drew in his compelling eyebrows and snorted. Of course it had been necessary to send his nephew to the nursery for a wash and some clean clothing, but was his wife really foolish enough not to allow him to join them for dinner? Needless to say, he was the child of vagrants, and he would behave accordingly, but none of his five well-mannered daughters was worth so much as the little finger of that child.

Before he could express his disappointment, the baroness made a slight movement with one hand, pointing at a little girl on the chair next to him, her hair neatly plaited.

After a quick head count, he realized that that day there were six little girls at the table. He understood that they had dressed the lad in girl's clothing. Perfectly natural, since the rags he had been wearing upon arrival would not do for the

dinner table, and there were only girls' clothes to be had at Hedeby. Still, surely there had been no need to braid that hair, those curly golden locks, into two braids that dangled alongside his ears, just as on his daughters.

'Couldn't you have borrowed a pair of trousers from the foreman,' the baron inquired, 'so you wouldn't have had to dress the boy up so foolishly?'

'Certainly,' his wife responded, her voice just as controlled as usual, with no trace of ridicule or malicious pleasure, 'certainly we could have done that, I imagine. But now she is dressed as rightly becomes her.'

Baron Adrian looked at his wife, at the child, and then back at his wife again.

'I'm afraid Göran has deceived you once more,' said the baroness.

And there was not a tone to her voice, not a glimmer in her eye, to let on that she felt any differently about the whole matter than her husband.

And indeed she did not. She absolutely thought that Göran had behaved shamefully, and exposed his usual spiteful nature. If, deep down, something else was shifting in her soul, it was quite involuntary.

But, well, if a person has been made into a doormat, stepped on every day, it cannot be helped, can it, that the mat would feel a little jolt of satisfaction if the man who has stamped hardest and with the sharpest iron spikes on his heels took a tiny, harmless plummet.

And when the baroness saw her husband's brow furrowed, saw him reject the platter of meat offered by the serving maid, quite as if this little mishap had deprived him of his appetite, her body began to tremble, although her face remained frozen.

Later she had pause to wonder, often, what would have happened to her, to his old aunt, the nursery maid and the six girls, had her husband not risen from his chair with an ugly expletive and rushed from the room. She, personally, would not have been able to stay solemn for a single second longer. She just had to burst out laughing, and so did all the others.

Each and every one just had to lean back in her chair and dissolve into laughter.

They laughed loud and long, each one louder than the next, though at the same time they were embarrassed. It was, of course, not proper to laugh when the head of the family and household had been duped. They were decent, well-bred women and they definitely disapproved of themselves. But their laughter quite simply came from natural human depths, and could not be restrained without risk of suffocation.

The room was in an uproar. For a few minutes they cast aside anything that might otherwise be weighing them down or smothering them, and felt free and superior. They thought they would never again be as suppressed and intimidated as in the past, because they had found themselves able to laugh at their oppressor. As they laughed at him he lost his terrifying power and became an ordinary little human being just like them.

And the baroness, who always spoke of Baron Adrian as the best of all possible husbands, and of herself as the happiest of wives, who never let any stranger, in fact not even his aunt or the nursery maid, make the slightest comment on her husband's behavior, the baroness swore to herself that if she should ever encounter Göran Löwensköld she would try to do something to thank him for this wonderful joke.

But the next day, when the rogue baron was found frozen to death in a wayside ditch near the parsonage and had been transported back to Hedeby, stiff and cold, she did not actually lift a finger to show him the sympathy she had felt for him for a few transient moments. She left all the funeral and burial arrangements to her husband and never protested about a thing.

Baron Adrian went to the expense of having him shrouded, ordered a coffin, and had the family grave opened. He arranged a date for the removal of the body to the chapel with the clergyman from Bro, and took a number of members of the household staff along to the funeral.

But he did nothing more.

He did not allow the windows at Hedeby to be covered

with white sheets, had no evergreen branches spread along the lane, did not let the baroness and her daughters dress in mourning. He did not invite any of the gentlemen of the parish to accompany the coffin to the cemetery, ordered no funeral sweetmeats, and had no funeral reception at home.

In the whole parish of Bro there was not a soul who was anything but glad that Göran Löwensköld was dead. Never again would he assault the gentlemen at the Broby market, pat them on the back and refer to them informally as his brothers just because they had once been classmates at school in Karlstad. It was a relief to almost everyone to know that it would never again occur to him to ask for a fine old gold watch in exchange for a cheap, battered silver one, or a handsome four-year-old mare for an old nag of a horse that was nothing but skin and bones. Indeed it was good to know that he had passed on. While he was alive no one could ever be sure what he might ask for or what revenge he might exact if his request was refused.

Still though, the whole parish of Bro felt that Baron Adrian's behavior seemed overly vindictive. They said that since Baron Göran had lost his life, his brother ought to have been prepared to let bygones be bygones and see him to the grave in dignity and honor.

Moreover, they were almost more critical of the baroness than of her husband, because they would have expected a woman to show greater compassion. Just imagine, she had not so much as put a flower on his coffin! Everyone knew that the enormous calla lily in the dining room at Hedeby was in bloom at the time, and there is nothing as appropriate to see a person who has passed on through his final journey as a calla lily, but none had been given. What could they say about that? Was it not almost inhuman to be unwilling to sacrifice as much as a single calla blossom for her brother-in-law?

Many people probably also thought that Baron Göran's wife ought to have been informed of her husband's death, and were surprised that the baroness did not remind her husband of it. And at least the little girl, Göran Löwensköld's most beloved daughter, ought to have had a mourning

Anna Svärd

dress made up for her. Surely the baroness could not be so subordinate to, and intimidated by, her husband that she did not dare bring a seamstress to the house to arrange suitable clothing for a fatherless child.

As everyone knew, the baroness at Hedeby was a perceptive woman who knew very well how things should be done. And of course she ought to have felt it her duty to bring her husband around when he erred. But on that occasion, she did no such thing.