

Sanoi Minna Canth: Pioneer Reformer

Extracts from Minna Canth's Works and Letters, Edited by Ritva Heikkilä
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Minna Canth, Pioneer Reformer. Ninety years have passed since Minna Canth died. But her plays still continue to be performed at frequent intervals. In response to the interest in her output evinced by friends of Finnish literature overseas, Ritva Heikkilä compiled these extracts from Canth's writings. The volume gives a good idea of the writer's versatile gifts, bold views and pioneering spirit as a champion of social reform

Autobiographical Sketch (Written for the Norwegian journal *Samtiden* in 1891)

Out of gratitude for the interest you have taken in me, I hereby hasten to give you the information you desire.

Born in 1844 in the city of Tampere, where my father, Gustaf Wilhelm Johnson, worked at the time as an inspector in our country's biggest cotton mill. When I was eight years old, he moved from there to the town of Kuopio, where he did business with products from the same mill. From my infancy I was the apple of my father's eye; and I remember how he liked to brag a bit about my talents to the simple working people who in those days belonged to our circle of acquaintances. And they looked upon me as a child prodigy, for as a five-year-old I could read "like a preacher," sing hymns in a ringing voice and accompany myself with a psaltery. Though my father's circumstances at the time were humble, he nevertheless wanted to give me the best education a girl could hope for in our country. There was no fancy girls' school in Tampere, but I understand I was going to be sent to Turku to be trained to become a teacher. That

was the highest goal he could think of for his daughter, who in his opinion was so exceptionally talented. In the meantime, a "higher school for ladies," was founded in Kuopio too; it was not necessary to send me to Turku, as I was able to obtain the kind of instruction considered appropriate for a girl in my own home town.

As a child, I had a lively imagination and led a peculiar emotional life. I was deeply religious and often saw visions and dreams, in which I was scolded when I had done something naughty, comforted when I was sad, given guidance and advice when on the most important occasions I felt at a loss to know what to do. Thus I actually believed myself to be in direct contact with the infinite, and after a teacher of religion had said that God often takes away through an early death the children he loves most, I wished this grace would be my lot. My longing for death was so intense I even considered suicide but refrained from acting out of fear of sin and punishment. When the years passed and I stayed alive, I at first doubted God's love — how could He have the heart to expose me to all the temptations of life? Soon, however, I was consoled by the thought that underlying it was perhaps a deeper purpose, and now I believed firmly that I had a mission in life.

When I finished school, I was unable to decide what this mission might be. Life began, however, to hold a stronger attraction for me. Though from time to time I was oppressed by a deep melancholy, at other times I could indulge in dancing and pleasures with all my heart. Erotic feelings stirred in me — but of an extremely transitory nature, presumably because I inordinately idealized the object of my adoration. Usually I then quite soon perceived limitations and weaknesses, whereupon love instantly disappeared. One and another heart was "broken," my own once in the bargain, though it healed quickly

enough and functioned as before. I was chided, but it was my own conscience that blamed me most; I suffered and lost a good deal of self-esteem. All this was needless, however, my feelings not allowing themselves to be forced; I already thought it would be impossible for me to consider marrying, my disposition being so fickle.

It was then that our first public school teachers' seminary was founded in the town of Jyväskylä in 1863. A light suddenly flashed in my brain. This could provide me with a satisfying field of activity, a worthwhile purpose in life. I would become one of the seminary's first students. Inspired by the high ideal represented by the institution of the public school, I intended to surrender myself to it completely. The year I was perfectly faithful to my resolve was surely the happiest of my life. But I broke the pledge I had given to myself the very next year by becoming engaged to my teacher, Johan Ferdinand Canth, an instructor of natural science. Before that, the principal of the seminary had said to me: "The Lord has summoned you; you must obey Him and become a teacher. If you marry, you will never experience happiness, for deep down you will always carry the knowledge that you have been disobedient to Him and traveled your own road."

These words I have never forgotten — they were confirmed only too well by my own inner voice. All the bad things that happened to me after that I understood to be punishment for this unforgivable sin.

I now had to forget all my idealistic aspirations and instead do needlework, prepare meals and keep house and take care of my husband, all tasks that went against my grain. Bravely did I tackle these, however: for some time I denied myself all reading, except for newspapers, and I tried my best to dull my sense of loss. One truth was now clear to me — I must



Minna Canth

Photo: Ritva Heikkilä

be an obedient wife to my husband. This I understood so radically that in the first years I never expressed my own opinion, but my husband's will was law in all things. People called me "white plaster" and regarded me with good reason as a nonentity. My husband, you see, was considered eccentric and he had no mind to conform to the requirements of social life in a small town, and this attitude of his offended many. Gradually, after a few years, I dared in more important matters to express a contrary opinion. Things were tried out the way I suggested and found out to be right, and as a result my husband developed an unshakable faith in my good judgment — even in matters I really knew nothing about. For eight years I languished for lack of intellectual nourishment before my husband began to edit a newspaper. "A wife is given a man to serve as his helper." No longer did my

stupid conscience set up obstacles in my path. I was once more able to exercise my mental faculties, and this I did gleefully and with a vim. It was as if I had been reborn. And I became possessed by the spirit of reform. I wrote thunderous articles against the curse of drink; and they caused people to sit up and take notice, for the issues of temperance had not yet stirred to life in our country. But, oh my! I'd forgotten that the owner of the newspaper also owned a distillery. He went into a rage and accused me of "burning his bread."

By the time the year was over, my husband no longer held the post of editor of the paper and I was obliged to return humbly to my sewing machine. A couple of years later, things brightened up again. A new, bigger paper began to be published in our community and my husband was hired as subeditor. I took up my pen

once again and with more energy than ever. I wrote a few articles about women's rights (it was, of course, impossible for me to write without demanding reforms). In my own opinion, these articles were first-rate, but they awakened no response: the issue had been brought up too soon.

Around that time, the Finnish Theater visited our little town and gave a few performances, of which I saw, among others, Denner's *Marianne* and Birch-Pfeiffer's *The Cricket*. Deep impressions. An irresistible desire to try my hand as a playwright. I went about it without hesitation. I wrote *Murtovarkaus* (The Burglary), a folk play, in which an angelic young girl is wrongfully suspected of stealing on account of a miserable witch's outfit. The truth was made known by a vagabond named Hoppulainen, an amusing rascal, lighthearted and good-natured. He is, incidentally, the most interesting character in the play, and he was taken straight out of real life the way I once saw him, a man of flesh and blood, during a fair in the Jyväskylä market place.

When I had reached about the half-way point in my play, my husband died of brain fever. I was left a widow after thirteen years of marriage, and I had seven children, of whom the youngest was born a few months after my husband's death. My father had died some years before; my mother, Ulrika Johnson, was still alive but in very pinched circumstances. There was nobody I could turn to, besides which I was sick and wretched. The future looked dark before me; I had no idea how to support my large family. My father had gone bankrupt; nevertheless, I decided, come what might, to move to Kuopio and there open up the same kind of business he had kept.

I finished writing *Murtovarkaus*, sent it to Kaarlo Bergbom, manager of the Finnish Theater, and thought now that I would have to give up forever such idealistic pursuits because making a living would use up all my strength. After the birth of my baby, I had no strength left, the struggle for survival was proving hard for me, I was on the verge of succumbing. I tottered on the brink of madness. I was possessed by a frightening perturbation of mind, and I was compelled on a number of nights to beseech my maid and older children to keep an eye on me because a strange power kept insisting that I take the life of my youngest child. My old per-

sonality within struggled against the threatening destruction desperately and gradually gained the upper hand, but there remained a troublesome nervous debility lasting for years.

In the meantime, the Finnish Literature Society had awarded me a prize for my *Burglary*. The play was produced for the first time by the Finnish Theater in the spring of 1882, being performed successfully six or seven times in rapid succession, after which it has held its place in the repertoire all these years. I was urged to continue. I wrote *Roinilan talossa* (In the House of Roinila), a summer idyl, with shepherds' songs and mooing cattle, love conflicts and in the end marriage. It was produced the very next season and likewise got a very warm reception from both public and the critics. Neither of these plays had any kind of tendency. In this respect, even the most pious had no cause for complaint. But I forget. Among my closest friends there were, to be sure, certain virtuous ladies who were appalled at the unheard-of light-mindedness with which a certain mother, a widow with seven children, could sit down with serious intent to write plays to be performed in a theater. Some of the more vigilant clergymen, moreover, had already scented in *Murtovarkaus* suspicious traces of immoral tendencies inimical to Christian principles, in response to which they unloaded their souls in certain provincial journals.

Around that time, I read Georg Brandes's *Hovedströmninger* as well as works by H. Taine, Spencer, Stuart Mill and Buckle and at last felt freed of those prejudices that had held my soul in bondage and burdened my conscience with all kinds of muddles. And I was once again infected with reformist zeal. I wrote *Työmiehen vaimo* (The Workman's Wife), in which I lashed out boldly at all the injustices women were subjected to by the law, at preposterous religious notions, men's boozing and wantonness, women's stupidity, shallowness and disposition to be prejudiced — in short, all the evil and madness I had found in the world. The play is filled with the sharpest satire from start to finish, but it has no deeper psychology or artistic ripeness either. Even so, it made a tremendous impact when, in 1885, it was performed for the first time at the Finnish Theater. Some praised it to the skies, while others spilled the cup of their

wrath over it. Criticism and abuse rained on me like hail. I was not spared. I was branded an atheist and free-thinker; parents forbade their children to visit my house; I lost a large number of my friends, and it required a certain amount of moral courage from the rest who still dared to acknowledge me.

The mental state that produces *Työmiehen vaimo* was nurtured by a sense of animation, daring and vigor, underlain perhaps by morbid nervous irritability. Mental strain, on the one hand, and all the harsh attacks to which I had been exposed, on the other, together with, finally, the pain of losing friends severely depressed my spirits. I now had to endure a constant psychic pain, a sense of cerebral blockage, which brought on a recurrence of my haunting fear of the worst. A mission, a calling, nevertheless still possessed me. I would valiantly fight for the oppressed to the end. It was then that I wrote *Kovan onnen lapsia* (Children of Misfortune), a heart-rending description of the distress and misery of the proletariat, which ends up in desperation, crime and imprisonment. This play was performed on the stage only once, in the autumn of 1888, when it also appeared in print. Further performances were banned by the authorities, besides which the play was torn apart by the critics — wrongfully, I thought.

I had now suffered the humiliation of being ousted from the Finnish stage; my literary efforts scarcely seemed worthy of encouragement in any quarter; and I was left to ponder on the strange phenomena of human life all alone. I no longer had but a few loyal friends left. I now thought it best to rest on my laurels, and that's exactly what I did, which proved highly beneficial to my brains and my nerves.

The following year I lost through death, however, my best man friend (E.R. Erkko) and one of my best women friends (Hilda Asp) as well as, finally, my greatly beloved grown-up daughter (Hanna Canth). I suddenly felt as if I had been snatched away to the gates of eternity, and I gained a freer, brighter vision of life and human conditions. Slaps and blows no longer hurt, and I no longer had any desire to deal them out on my part, either. I no longer took part in combat, except as a spectator. Furthermore, political conditions took an oppressive turn, giving cause to fear a dark future for our nation. The residue of

bitterness vanished; I again offered my despised services to the Finnish Theater, the greatly honored director of which, Dr. Bergbom, had the whole time shown me exceedingly warm graciousness.

I therefore wrote *Papin perhe* (The Parson's Family), which is an objective depiction of the gap between the old and the new generation. This play has been performed this spring at the Finnish Theater in Helsinki seven or eight times, in addition to which a couple of performances have been given in the countryside. It has been favorably received by both the critics and the audiences. In my own opinion, however, it is a bit tame and colorless. To tell the truth, I am not satisfied with a single thing I have written so far, but I hope in the future to turn out better works, for I still have thirteen years left before I reach the age of sixty, the age, that is, at which every writer, I understand, "ought to be clubbed."

It is impossible for me to say how often the plays *Murtovarkaus*, *Roinilan talossa* and *Työmiehen vaimo* have been given performances. *Kansanteatteri* (The People's Theater) has performed them every year many times in different country towns. One or another of them has likewise been included in the repertory of the Finnish Theater, in addition to which they are put on here and there by amateur dramatic societies. *Työmiehen vaimo* has been translated into Swedish and performed in Stockholm in 1886, to the best of my recollection, ten times.

It is hard to say from which of my parents I have inherited my literary gifts — if I possess them as a birthright. But I suppose that, just as I have inherited my facial features and the shape of my head from my father and the color of my skin from my mother, I have inherited my mental traits in part from both. In such a way that my emotional life, with its impulses, affects, sentiments and inclinations, comes from my mother, whereas all that belongs to my thinking processes comes more from my father.

My mother is still alive. She is eighty years old and in her old age she has become very religious. Every day she now reads religious literature, probably just as ardently as I mundane literature. For this she did not allow herself the time while she was in her prime.

To Harald Hansen April 10, 1881