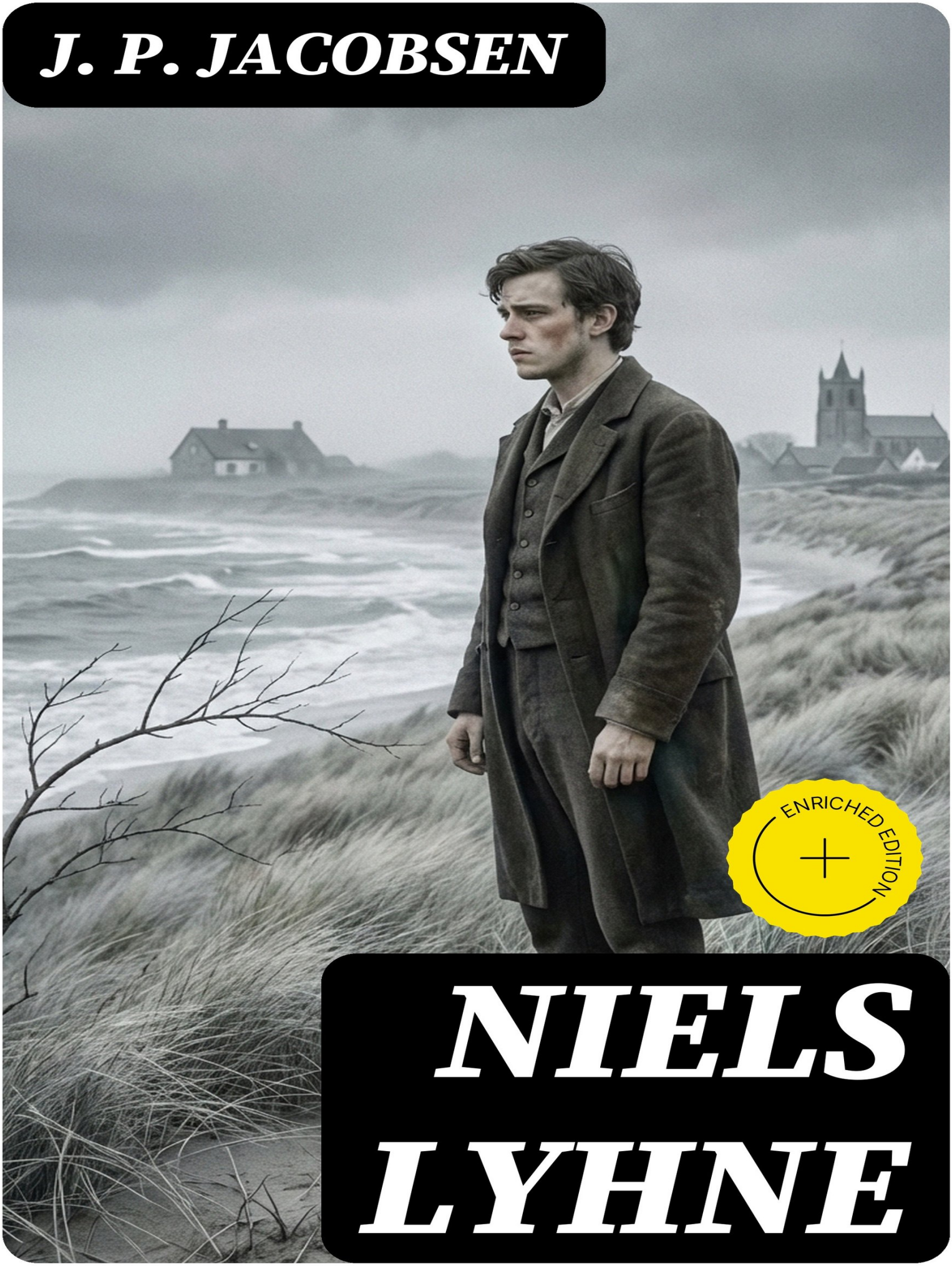
J. P. JACOBSEN



ENRICHED EDITION

NIELS LYHNE

J. P. Jacobsen

Niels Lyhne

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Gavin Avery

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Introduction

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Poised between yearning for absolute meaning and the relentless drift of lived experience, Niels Lyhne follows the fragile passage from youthful ideals to adult awareness, asking how a modern consciousness can stand when belief falters, love proves contingent, and art must answer to life, while the consolations of family, friendship, and the natural world flicker with beauty yet refuse to quiet doubt, so that every choice becomes a testing ground where sincerity, courage, and the appetite for transcendence contend with irony, habit, and the stubborn material facts that make hope luminous precisely because it is never entirely safe.

J. P. Jacobsen’s Niels Lyhne is a realist and psychological novel rooted in nineteenth-century Denmark, first published in 1880 during the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough that pressed literature toward secular inquiry and empirical clarity. Its world stretches from provincial households to urban salons and artists’ circles, evoking landscapes and interiors with a painterly exactness that serves the book’s analytic gaze. Jacobsen, a central voice in his era, shapes a narrative attentive to ordinary customs and the inner life, bringing naturalist discipline to feelings as much as to facts. The result is a work at once intimate in scope and expansive in intellectual ambition.

At its core is the life of Niels, a young man reared amid gentle comforts who dreams of authorship and tests his mind against the religious and social certainties he inherits. The plot advances through episodes of friendship,

mentorship, and love, each turning on questions of self-knowledge rather than sensational action. Jacobsen’s voice moves with calm authority and lyrical restraint, attentive to sensual detail without losing philosophical poise. The tone is reflective, sometimes somber, never melodramatic; the pacing allows moods to deepen. Readers encounter a steady, observant third person that invites sympathy while insisting on unsparing psychological clarity.

A central theme is unbelief and its consequences: the novel treats atheism not as a slogan but as a lived condition, tracing how skepticism reshapes imagination, ethics, and intimacy. Alongside this inquiry runs an equally urgent meditation on art—what it asks of a life, what it can give back, and where its limits sit when measured against suffering and duty. Jacobsen explores chance and contingency with sober patience, suggesting how fragile ideals must negotiate accident and pressure. The book’s attention to nature, illness, and time grounds these debates, keeping philosophical speculation tethered to bodies, seasons, and the slow education of feeling.

Relationships form a prism through which Niels’s convictions are tested, and Jacobsen draws companions and counterparts with a delicacy that avoids caricature. Friends, elders, and lovers embody competing outlooks—piety and pragmatism, romantic risk and prudent retreat—so that dialogue and silence alike become instruments of inquiry. The settings are not mere backdrops; coastal light, gardens, and drawing rooms register shifts of mood and value, their textures observed with scientific patience and poetic tact. Jacobsen’s sentences unfurl with measured cadence, favoring nuance over verdicts, so the reader senses gradual accretion rather than thesis, an inner biography built from glances, hesitations, and resolves.

For contemporary readers, the novel’s questions feel newly immediate: what becomes of responsibility, love, and artistic ambition when unmoored from religious assurance, and how can one live truthfully amid competing claims of career, family, and self? Jacobsen writes with quiet radicalism, showing that doubt need not collapse into cynicism, that tenderness can coexist with rigor, and that freedom carries its own disciplines. The book speaks to debates about secular ethics, gender expectations, and the costs of self-fashioning, without prescribing answers. Its calm, scrupulous attention to experience models a way of reading the world that resists noise and prizes lucidity.

Niels Lyhne occupies a durable place in Danish letters and has resonated widely in European literature; it has been admired by writers such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann, who recognized its unsentimental courage and melodic prose. Successive translations have carried Jacobsen’s sensibility across languages, preserving a novel that rewards unhurried attention and rereading. To approach it today is to meet a precursor of modernist introspection and a companion for private deliberation. Its measure of human aspiration is neither punitive nor consolatory; it steadies the gaze, honors complexity, and leaves the reader with clarified questions rather than exhausted certainties.

Synopsis

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Niels Lyhne (1880) by Danish writer J. P. Jacobsen follows the life of its eponymous protagonist from childhood to adulthood, tracing the formation of a modern consciousness in 19th-century Denmark. The novel opens amid the quiet routines of a provincial estate, where Niels's world is shaped by a dream-prone mother and more practical surroundings. Jacobsen's patient, sensuous narration dwells on nature, memory, and imagination, establishing a conflict between inward yearning and external demands that will govern the trajectory of Niels's life. The book situates personal growth within the era's shifting moral and intellectual tides, preparing a sustained inquiry into belief, art, and fate.

As a child, Niels absorbs stories, music, and the mutable moods of the landscape, nurturing a precocious sensibility that leans toward reverie. The household's expectations and the measured pace of rural life encourage reflection but also a tendency to postpone decisive action. Early friendships and family ties acquaint him with loyalty, secrecy, and the first stirrings of desire. Jacobsen depicts these initiations without sensationalism, showing how small incidents leave lasting impressions. The character's self-conception begins to crystallize: he imagines himself destined for poetry or some refined vocation, though his inner certainty rarely translates into outward achievement, foreshadowing a pattern of hesitation.

Adolescence brings encounters with love that test Niels's ideals. He experiences attachments animated by

imagination as much as intimacy, and social conventions complicate his advances. Romantic expectations collide with contingency, and the resulting disappointments carve out a quiet skepticism about the promises of passion. Yet these reversals also deepen his sympathy and sharpen his sense of human frailty. Rather than emancipating him, the allure of the artistic life begins to bind him to projections of what love and success should feel like. Jacobsen charts the slow, inward drama of a young man calibrating his heart between longing, pride, and resignation.

Parallel to his romantic uncertainties, Niels fashions a clear, rigorously secular worldview. He rejects religious consolation and aspires to an ethics grounded in honesty and self-responsibility. Conversations with acquaintances, exposure to new ideas, and solitary contemplation consolidate his unbelief into a guiding principle, less as rebellion than as fidelity to experience. The novel treats this stance neither polemically nor sentimentally; it records the labor of maintaining conviction amid ambiguity. Jacobsen’s attention to mood and nuance shows how skepticism can be both liberating and isolating, giving Niels a measure of integrity while depriving him of ready-made meanings in moments of need.

Adulthood arrives with practical choices and unforeseen shocks. Niels engages in work, renews relationships, and entertains ambitions for a literary vocation, all while navigating the claims of friendship and intimacy. Historical events intrude, bringing him into contact with danger and testing his composure. Loss and responsibility press on his ideals, asking whether an unbeliever can endure grief without recourse to transcendence. Jacobsen stages these trials in episodes that are more reflective than melodramatic, letting their consequences accumulate. The protagonist strives to live up to his professed views, and the

narrative shows how conviction must be lived through, not merely declared.

Across these years, the novel probes the gap between aspiration and action. Niels cherishes a vision of artistic significance, yet the texture of everyday life—obligations, fatigue, shifting circumstances—blunts the heroic posture he imagines. Jacobsen’s style, blending naturalist detail with lyrical intensity, keeps attention on the minute sensations and hesitations that shape choice. Secondary figures, sketched with psychological economy, mirror or challenge aspects of his temperament. Repeatedly, he confronts the temptation to mythologize himself, only to be recalled to ordinary limits. The result is a study of character in slow motion, where recognitions arrive without grand declarations or final certainties.

Considered a touchstone of the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough, Niels Lyhne illuminates secular identity with unusual tenderness and rigor. Its enduring resonance lies in the measured portrayal of conviction under pressure and of longing unconverted into achievement. Readers encounter a portrait of modern doubt that neither condemns nor celebrates disbelief, but observes its costs and dignities. With an atmosphere of lyrical realism and patient analysis, the novel influenced later writers and continues to speak to questions about meaning, vocation, and courage. Its quiet audacity is to make an examined life compelling while leaving room for readers to draw their own conclusions.

Historical Context

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Published in 1880, Niels Lyhne by the Danish author J. P. Jacobsen (1847–1885) belongs to the late nineteenth-century Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough. Set largely in Denmark, the narrative moves between provincial estates and Copenhagen, the kingdom’s cultural and administrative center. Since 1849 Denmark had been a constitutional monarchy, with the Evangelical Lutheran Church as the national church and the University of Copenhagen as its most prominent intellectual institution. Jacobsen presents the formation of a modern intellectual amid these settings, observing salons, artistic circles, and domestic life. The book’s restrained realism reflects the sober, empirical temper that increasingly shaped Nordic letters in the 1870s and 1880s.

Mid-century Danish politics furnished a climate of loss and reassessment. The 1849 Constitution ended absolutism, but the Second Schleswig War (1864) saw Denmark defeated by Prussia and Austria, losing Schleswig, Holstein, and Lauenburg. The constitutional revision of 1866 strengthened conservative influence in the upper chamber, and national life turned inward after the territorial loss. Mandatory military service and the memory of 1864 shaped male adulthood and civic ideals. These developments informed literary explorations of duty, identity, and individual aspiration. Jacobsen’s generation came of age as the country balanced rural traditions with a modernizing capital still haunted by military defeat.

In 1871–1872 Georg Brandes delivered his influential University of Copenhagen lectures, Main Currents in 19th Century Literature, launching the Scandinavian “Modern Breakthrough.” He urged writers to put contemporary problems under debate, favoring realism, psychology, and social critique. Jacobsen aligned with this movement and became one of its emblematic stylists. He adopted naturalist attention to environment and character while avoiding melodrama, in prose often described as impressionistic. Alongside Norwegian and Swedish contemporaries—such as Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson—the Danish breakthrough sought to replace romantic idealization with critical inquiry, situating literature within public conversations about religion, gender, and social convention.

Scientific ideas were central to that shift. Jacobsen introduced Charles Darwin’s theories to Danish readers by translating On the Origin of Species (Danish 1872) and The Descent of Man (Danish 1874). Darwinism, positivism, and historical criticism challenged religious orthodoxy in a society where the Lutheran state church still ordered civic rites. At the same time, revivalist Lutheranism gained ground through the Inner Mission (Indre Mission), founded in 1861, which emphasized personal piety and social conservatism. The clash between secular inquiry and confessional renewal formed a vivid backdrop for debates about morality, meaning, and doubt—questions that Jacobsen treats without polemic but with rigorous candor.

Copenhagen’s cultural infrastructure amplified these debates. The Royal Danish Theatre, the University’s lecture halls, reading societies, and widely circulated periodicals like Illustreret Tidende fostered a metropolitan public sphere. Publishers such as Gyldendal helped consolidate a national canon while importing European trends. Scandinavian

stages and newspapers discussed Ibsen’s Pillars of Society (1877) and A Doll’s House (1879), fueling disputes about individual freedom and marriage. Visual art and music, influenced by realism and a sober Nordic palette, complemented literary modernity. Jacobsen’s fiction emerged from this milieu of salons, cafés, and editorial offices, where cultivated skepticism and aesthetic refinement shaped the sensibility of educated urban readers.

Beneath metropolitan polish, Denmark experienced broad educational and social change. Folk high schools, inspired by N. F. S. Grundtvig from the 1840s, expanded adult education and national culture, while the Students’ Association in Copenhagen organized lectures and debates for the urban intelligentsia. A growing middle class prized danelse—cultivated self-formation—yet differed sharply over its content: pietist renewal, Grundtvigian humanism, or secular science. The Danish Women’s Society, founded in 1871, pressed for legal and educational reforms, intensifying public discussion of marriage, work, and autonomy. Jacobsen’s characters move within these institutional pressures, measuring private dreams against expectations set by class, school, and family.

Denmark’s international position also framed the era’s introspection. After the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871, a small neutral Denmark lived beside a dominant neighbor, orienting its prestige toward culture rather than power. Translations and criticism brought French realism and naturalism—Flaubert, Zola—and English liberal thought into Scandinavian salons. Across the 1880s, the Nordic “morality debate” scrutinized sexual double standards and the ethics of modern marriage, with newspapers serving as a tribunal for conduct and ideas. These transnational currents enter Danish letters not as slogans but as tensions: cosmopolitan

ambition, national modesty, and a wish for authenticity under scrutiny.

Niels Lyhne embodies this historical moment by dramatizing the modern individual’s collision with inherited belief, social duty, and the fragility of ideals. Without programmatic manifesto, Jacobsen subjects faith, art, love, and courage to empirical observation, asking how convictions endure when tested by ordinary life and public catastrophe. The novel’s measured style—precise, unsentimental, attentive to atmosphere—mirrors the Modern Breakthrough’s ethic, while its portrait of doubt addresses controversies stirred by Darwinism and revivalism. Set against post-1864 Denmark’s muted patriotism and searching culture, the book functions as both record and critique: an exploration of freedom and responsibility in a small nation’s age of reassessment.

Niels Lyhne

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CHAPTER I

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She had the black, luminous eyes of the Blid family with delicate, straight eyebrows; she had their boldly shaped nose, their strong chin, and full lips. The curious line of mingled pain and sensuousness about the corners of her mouth was likewise an inheritance from them, and so were the restless movements of her head; but her cheek was pale; her hair was soft as silk, and was wound smoothly around her head.

Not so the Blids; their coloring was of roses and bronze. Their hair was rough and curly, heavy as a mane, and their full, deep, resonant voices bore out the tales told of their forefathers, whose noisy hunting-parties, solemn morning prayers, and thousand and one amorous adventures were matters of family tradition.

Her voice was languid and colorless. I am describing her as she was at seventeen. A few years later, after she had been married, her voice gained fullness, her cheek took on a fresher tint, and her eye lost some of its lustre, but seemed even larger and more intensely black.

At seventeen she did not at all resemble her brothers and sisters; nor was there any great intimacy between herself and her parents. The Blid family were practical folk who accepted things as they were; they did their work, slept their sleep, and never thought of demanding any diversions beyond the harvest home and three or four Christmas parties. They never passed through any religious

experiences, but they would no more have dreamed of not rendering unto God what was God’s than they would have neglected to pay their taxes. Therefore they said their evening prayers, went to church at Easter and Whitsun[1], sang their hymns on Christmas Eve, and partook of the Lord’s Supper twice a year. They had no particular thirst for knowledge. As for their love of beauty, they were by no means insensible to the charm of little sentimental ditties, and when summer came with thick, luscious grass in the meadows and grain sprouting in broad fields, they would sometimes say to one another that this was a fine time for travelling about the country, but their natures had nothing of the poetic; beauty never stirred any raptures in them, and they were never visited by vague longings or day-dreams.

Bartholine was not of their kind. She had no interest in the affairs of the fields and the stables, no taste for the dairy and the kitchen—none whatever.

She loved poetry[1q].

She lived on poems, dreamed poems, and put her faith in them above everything else in the world. Parents, sisters and brothers, neighbors and friends—none of them ever said a word that was worth listening to. Their thoughts never rose above their land and their business; their eyes never sought anything beyond the conditions and affairs that were right before them.

But the poems! They teemed with new ideas and profound truths about life in the great outside world, where grief was black, and joy was red; they glowed with images, foamed and sparkled with rhythm and rhyme. They were all

about young girls, and the girls were noble and beautiful—how noble and beautiful they never knew themselves. Their hearts and their love meant more than the wealth of all the earth; men bore them up in their hands, lifted them high in the sunshine of joy, honored and worshipped them, and were delighted to share with them their thoughts and plans, their triumphs and renown. They would even say that these same fortunate girls had inspired all the plans and achieved all the triumphs.

Why might not she herself be such a girl? They were thus and so—and they never knew it themselves. How was she to know what she really was? And the poets all said very plainly that this was life, and that it was not life to sit and sew, work about the house, and make stupid calls.

When all this was sifted down, it meant little beyond a slightly morbid desire to realize herself, a longing to find herself, which she had in common with many other young girls with talents a little above the ordinary. It was only a pity that there was not in her circle a single individual of sufficient distinction to give her the measure of her own powers. There was not even a kindred nature. So she came to look upon herself as something wonderful, unique, a sort of exotic plant that had grown in these ungentle climes and had barely strength enough to unfold its leaves; though in more genial warmth, under a more powerful sun, it might have shot up, straight and tall, with a gloriously rich and brilliant bloom. Such was the image of her real self that she carried in her mind. She 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.

One fine day a suitor came to her.

Young Lyhne of Lönborggaard was the man, and he was the last male scion of a family whose members had for three generations been among the most distinguished people in the county. As burgomasters, revenue-collectors, or royal commissioners, often rewarded with the title of councillor of justice, the Lyhnes in their maturer years had served king and country with diligence and honor. In their younger days they had travelled in France and Germany, and these trips, carefully planned and carried out with great thoroughness, had enriched their receptive minds with all the scenes of beauty and the knowledge of life that foreign lands had to offer. Nor were these years of travel pushed into the background, after their return, as mere reminiscences, like the memory of a feast after the last candle has burned down and the last note of music has died away. No, life in their homes was built on these years; the tastes awakened in this manner were not allowed to languish, but were nourished and developed by every means at their command. Rare copper plates, costly bronzes, German poetry, French juridical works, and French philosophy were every-day matters and common topics in the Lyhne households.

Their bearing had an old-fashioned ease, a courtly graciousness, which contrasted oddly with the heavy majesty and awkward pomposity of the other county families. Their speech was well rounded, delicately precise, a little marred, perhaps, by rhetorical affectation, yet it

somehow went well with those large, broad figures with their domelike foreheads, their bushy hair growing far back on their temples, their calm, smiling eyes, and slightly aquiline noses. The lower part of the face was too heavy, however, the mouth too wide, and the lips much too full.

Young Lyhne showed all these physical traits, but more faintly, and, in the same manner, the family intelligence seemed to have grown weary in him. None of the mental problems or finer artistic enjoyments that he encountered stirred him to any zeal or desire whatsoever. He had simply striven with them in a painstaking effort which was never brightened by joy in feeling his own powers unfold or pride in finding them adequate. Mere satisfaction in a task accomplished was the only reward that came to him.

His estate, Lönborggaard, had been left him by an uncle who had recently died, and he had returned from the traditional trip abroad in order to take over the management. As the Blid family were the nearest neighbors of his own rank, and his uncle had been intimate with them, he called, met Bartholine, and fell in love with her.

That she should fall in love with him was almost a foregone conclusion.

Here at last was some one from the outside world, some one who had lived in great, distant cities, where forests of spires were etched on a sunlit sky, where the air was vibrant with the chimes of bells, the pealing of organs, and the twanging of mandolins, while festal processions, resplendent with gold and colors, wound their way through broad streets; where marble mansions shone, where noble families flaunted bright escutcheons hung two by two over

wide portals, while fans flashed, and veils fluttered over the sculptured vines of curving balconies. Here was one who had sojourned where victorious armies had tramped the roads, where tremendous battles had invested the names of villages and fields with immortal fame, where smoke rising from gipsy fires trailed over the leafy masses of the forest, where red ruins looked down from vine-wreathed hills into the smiling valley, while water surged over the mill-wheel, and cow-bells tinkled as the herds came home over wide-arched bridges.

All these things he told about, not as the poems did, but in a matter-of-fact way, as familiarly as the people at home talked about the villages in their own county or the next parish. He talked of painters and poets, too, and sometimes he would laud to the skies a name that she had never even heard. He showed her their pictures and read their poems to her in the garden or on the hill where they could look out over the bright waters of the fjord and the brown, billowing heath. Love made him poetic; the view took on beauty, the clouds seemed like those drifting through the poems, and the trees were clothed in the leaves rustling so mournfully in the ballads.

Bartholine was happy; for her love enabled her to dissolve the twenty-four hours into a string of romantic episodes. It was romance when she went down the road to meet him; their meeting was romance, and so was their parting. It was romance when she stood on the hilltop in the light of the setting sun and waved him one last farewell before going up to her quiet little chamber, wistfully happy, to give herself up to thoughts of him; and when she

included his name in her evening prayer, that was romance, too.

She no longer felt the old vague desires and longings. The new life with its shifting moods gave her all she craved, and moreover her thoughts and ideas had been clarified through having some one to whom she could speak freely without fear of being misunderstood.

She was changed in another way, too. Happiness had made her more amiable toward her parents and sisters and brothers. She discovered that, after all, they had more intelligence than she had supposed and more feeling.

And so they were married.

The first year passed very much as their courtship; but when their wedded life had lost its newness, Lyhne could no longer conceal from himself that he wearied of always seeking new expressions for his love. He was tired of donning the plumage of romance and eternally spreading his wings to fly through all the heavens of sentiment and all the abysses of thought. He longed to settle peacefully on his own quiet perch and drowse, with his tired head under the soft, feathery shelter of a wing. He had never conceived of love as an ever-wakeful, restless flame, casting its strong, flickering light into every nook and corner of existence, making everything seem fantastically large and strange. Love to him was more like the quiet glow of embers on their bed of ashes, spreading a gentle warmth, while the faint dusk wraps all distant things in forgetfulness and makes the near seem nearer and more intimate.

He was tired, worn out. He could not stand all this romance. He longed for the firm support of the

commonplace under his feet, as a fish, suffocating in hot air, languishes for the clear, fresh coolness of the waves. It must end sometime, when it had run its course. Bartholine was no longer inexperienced either in life or books. She knew them as well as he. He had given her all he had—and now he was expected to go on giving. It was impossible; he had nothing more. There was only one comfort: Bartholine was with child.

Bartholine had long realized with sorrow that her conception of Lyhne was changing little by little, and that he no longer stood on the dizzy pinnacle to which she had raised him in the days of their courtship. While she did not yet doubt that he was at bottom what she called a poetic nature, she had begun to feel a little uneasy; for the cloven hoof of prose had shown itself once and again. This only made her pursue romance the more ardently, and she tried to bring back the old state of things by lavishing on him a still greater wealth of sentiment and a still greater rapture, but she met so little response that she almost felt as if she were stilted and unnatural. For awhile she tried to drag Lyhne with her, in spite of his resistance; she refused to accept what she suspected; but when, at last, the failure of her efforts made her begin to doubt whether her own mind and heart really possessed the treasures she had imagined, then she suddenly left him alone, became cool, silent, and reserved, and often went off by herself to grieve over her lost illusions. For she saw it all now, and was bitterly disappointed to find that Lyhne, in his inmost self, was no whit different from the people she used to live among. She had merely been deceived by the very ordinary fact that his

love, for a brief moment, had invested him with a fleeting glamor of soulfulness and exaltation—a very common occurrence with persons of a lower nature.

Lyhne was grieved and anxious, too, over the change in their relationship, and he tried to mend matters by unlucky attempts at the old romantic flights, but it all availed nothing except to show Bartholine yet more clearly how great had been her mistake.

Such was the state of things between man and wife when Bartholine brought forth her first child. It was a boy, and they called him Niels.

CHAPTER II

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In a way, the child brought the parents together again. Over his little cradle they would meet in a common hope, a common joy, and a common fear; of him they would think, and of him they would talk, each as often and as readily as the other, and each was grateful to the other for the child and for all the happiness and love he brought.

Yet they were still far apart.

Lyhne was quite absorbed in his farming and the affairs of the parish. Not that he took the position of a leader or even of a reformer, but he gave scrupulous attention to the existing order of things, looked on as an interested spectator, and carried out the cautious improvements recommended, after deliberate—very deliberate—consideration, by his old head servant or the elders of the parish.

It never occurred to him to make any use of the knowledge he had acquired in earlier days. He had too little faith in what he called theories and far too great respect for the time-hallowed, venerable dogmas of experience which other people called practical. In fact, there was nothing about him to indicate that he had not lived here and lived thus all his life—except one little trait. He had a habit of sitting for half hours at a time, quite motionless, on a stile or a boundary stone, looking out over the luscious green rye or the golden top-heavy oats, in a strange, vegetative trance. This was of the old Lyhne, the young Lyhne.

Bartholine, in her world, was by no means so ready to adapt herself quickly and with a good grace. No, she first had to voice her sorrow through the verses of a hundred poets, lamenting, in all the broad generalities of the period, the thousands of barriers and fetters that oppress humanity. Sometimes her lament would be clothed in lofty indignation, flinging its wordy froth against the thrones of emperors and the dungeons of tyrants; sometimes it would take the form of a calm, pitying sorrow, looking on as the effulgent light of beauty faded from a blind and slavish generation cowed and broken by the soulless bustle of the day; then again it would appear only as a gentle sigh for the freedom of the bird in its flight and of the cloud drifting lightly into the distance.

At last she grew tired of lamenting, and the impotence of her grief goaded her into doubt and bitterness. Like worshippers who beat their saint and tread him under foot when he refuses to show his power, she would scoff at the romance she once idolized, and scornfully ask herself whether she did not expect the bird Roc**[2]** to appear presently in the cucumber bed, or Aladdin’s cave to open under the floor of the milk cellar. She would answer herself in a sort of childish cynicism, pretending that the world was excessively prosaic, calling the moon green cheese and the roses potpourri, all with a sense of taking revenge and at the same time with a half uneasy, half fascinated feeling that she was committing blasphemy.

These attempts at setting herself free were futile. She sank back into the dreams of her girlhood, but with the difference that now they were no longer illumined by hope. Moreover, she had learned that they were only dreams—

along the Niger River; he disappeared and was presumed to have died during an expedition around 1805–1806.

7 A Gueridon is a small, often ornamental pedestal or side table of French origin used for holding lamps, flowers, or small objects, common in 18th–19th-century interiors.

8 Golgotha is the place outside Jerusalem identified in the New Testament as the site where Jesus was crucified; the name (from Aramaic) is often rendered “place of the skull,” and Gospel narratives mention phenomena such as an earthquake at the time of the crucifixion.

9 Christiansborg refers to Christiansborg Palace in central Copenhagen, a historic seat of the Danish monarchy and (later) government institutions; in the 19th century it housed important royal art collections that were described in contemporary catalogues and guidebooks.

10 A Bacchante is a female follower of Bacchus (Dionysus) in classical mythology, often depicted in art and sculpture as a frenzied or ecstatic participant in rites of wine and revelry; nineteenth-century artists commonly used Bacchantes as subjects for sensual or dramatic works.

11 Paulina (Paolina) Borghese (Paolina Bonaparte, c.1780–1825) was a sister of Napoleon Bonaparte and a celebrated sitter in the Neoclassical era, famously sculpted by Antonio Canova as 'Venus Victrix'; the reference means being posed or idealized in the style of such well-known Neoclassical portraiture.

12 Heine refers to Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), a major German poet and essayist whose lyric poems and satirical prose were widely read across Europe in the 19th century; by the period of this novel his work was commonly encountered in private households and salons.