

Gustaf Fröding

1860 - 1911

They danced by the roadside on Saturday night,
And the laughter resounded to left and to right,
With shouts of 'Hip, hip!' and of 'Hey!'
Nils Utterman, famed as a queer old freak,
Sat there and made his accordion squeak
With doodely, doodely, day!*

LONELINESS, drink, and hallucinations plagued the tragic life of Gustaf Fröding, who today is considered the "uncrowned king" of Swedish poetry. He is the most read and loved poet in Swedish literature. No other writer of the eighteenth century has meant so much to modern Swedish poets. While the reputations of many of his contemporaries are being torn apart his has never fallen into disfavor. As Harry Martinson, one of Sweden's leading authors of today, has said: "To open a book of Fröding's poems is like opening a gate to a Swedish pasture. It becomes not only a book. It becomes countryside to walk in, with a lake with sorrowful sighs by the shore. And one feels like pushing out in a boat to search for Ingalill" (a character who appears in some of Fröding's poems). Though many of his poems take place in his home area of Värmland and are written in the dialect of that province, Fröding caught the atmosphere of Sweden and its people better than any other poet.

Fröding's parents were wealthy and had an estate outside the city of Karlstad. But at the time of his birth the family went through a financial crisis that made many changes in their way of life. Gustaf Fröding was born on August 22, 1860. During pregnancy his mother showed signs of mental aberrations and just after his birth she had to be placed in a mental institution where she stayed more than a year. And as Professor Henry Olsson, one of the members of the Swedish Academy, has pointed out in his outstanding work on the poet, Fröding's father was apparently so shaken by his wife's condition that he left Sweden on a business trip and did not return home until his wife did.

Gustaf Fröding inherited both degeneration and brilliance. There were many cases of insanity, and alcoholism, in his parents' families, which included intellectuals and ministers, some of whom were outstanding while others were degenerate. His maternal uncle, Emanuel Branzell, it is believed, was the model for Selma Lagerlof's Gösta Berling, the gifted and decadent priest. Fröding's father was interested in music and wrote some short verses at times, but after an attack of meningitis he spent the greater part of the day in his room, while the children were not allowed to make any noise in case they might disturb him. At this time his father became very interested in religious questions and made a continuous study of the Bible. During his illness, Jan Fröding became a hypochondriac. He changed socks ten or twelve times a day, his food had to be served at a certain temperature, and other things of a similar nature filled his day.

Later he also became a drug addict. Fröding's mother wrote poetry that she published under a pseudonym in a Värmland newspaper. Emilia Fröding was very unlike her husband as she was unreserved, spontaneous, and unconventional. Gustaf Fröding had both his mother's and father's characteristics: the resignation of his father and his mother's spirit of revolt, a tendency to be open-hearted and natural and also to draw himself away from everything and become a recluse.

A mother who was insane at times, an ill father, and the family's loss of wealth were circumstances that the physically weak and sensitive Fröding was not able to survive without being stricken for life. He also inherited a strong sexual desire from his mother's family, a desire which he was never able to satisfy but which rather led to much of his tragedy.

Professor Olsson points out how differently Fröding's friends and relatives characterized him. His sister Cecilia found him kind and good-natured, while his younger sister, Hedda, found him always active. His close friend, the radical publicist Mauritz Hellberg, emphasized the comic confusion in his character, and his school friend, Hjalmar Wallgren, pointed out his manner of superiority. These examples show how much the self-conscious Gustaf Fröding continually tried to wear a mask that would let him fit into his surroundings. In general during his school days in Värmland he played the part of a clown when he was with friends so as to hide his true self. He played this role somewhat in his poetry too, but when critics only remarked about the clown-figure he would swear at himself, asking why he also had to use this cover.

At the age of nineteen Fröding took *studentexamen* and went to the University of Uppsala. At this time his dream was to become professor of history. This interest had been aroused by his high school history teacher who presented a romanticized picture of past events. Fröding mainly enjoyed studying historical figures as he was fascinated by their personalities. Thomas Carlyle's *The French Revolution* was one of his favorite books. In the autumn of 1881 Fröding returned to Uppsala for his second year of study. He arrived with 17,000 Swedish crowns (3,200 dollars) that he had inherited from his father. In less than a year he had used the whole sum and returned home with a number of unpaid bills and torn clothes. He had spent the money on drink, parties and in general trying to amuse himself. He had also lent large sums to fellow students. Professor Henry Olsson says that the reasons why Fröding used this money so quickly are two-fold. First of all he had a feeling of guilt regarding how the money had been acquired. He felt that his family had exploited the working classes. Secondly he felt that he was a free man — but the drinking and sexual orgies that the money had paid for also gave him a guilty feeling. He tried to mix an academic life with a bohemian one, a plan that was bound to fail.

After three and one half years at Uppsala University he realized that there was no point in attempting to continue his studies. Fröding returned to Värmland where he lived with relatives and did little work. 'By 1885 he was greatly disappointed

with himself and then the first signs of his illness manifested themselves. He felt that his existence was hopeless. He believed that he was only suited to become a poet, yet he doubted that he had the ability for this. His mental condition was also reflected in a letter that he wrote to Mauritz Hellberg at this time. "I have a destructive, wearing longing for women" and further on he continues "I have searched for them in inns, in bars, and public places, but I cannot get a hold of them. I am pining to death from a longing to have bodily and spiritual contact with women. They fill my imagination and leave me no peace for other occupations. I cannot understand why one does not fall in love with me. I am surely too ugly in both my body and soul."

In January of 1887 Fröding was seriously in love for the first time. The girl was nine years younger than he and he was not in a financial position to ask her to marry him. Therefore he took a job on the radical newspaper *Karlstadstidningen* in the hope of appearing to be an acceptable suitor. Although his beloved enjoyed his company, she did not love him. In 1890, when Fröding was in a mental institution in Görlitz, Germany, he received a letter from a friend informing him his beloved was engaged to another. It is rather obvious that Fröding's attraction to Hildegard Alstermark was because of her youth and purity. This trait is characteristic of all the women with whom he fell in love. In fact his love affairs became more platonic with time. On the other hand, it is true that he had affairs that lasted short periods which were attempts to satisfy his sexual desire.

Fröding was placed in a mental institution in Görlitz in 1889, and this marked the turning point in his life that soon afterwards made him a praised poet. During the two years before going to Görlitz, Fröding had suffered attacks of insanity and had spent some time in institutions in Sweden. In 1888 one of his sisters, Matilda, was placed in an institution in Norway.

Just before making the trip to Görlitz, Fröding traveled to Göteborg (Gothenburg) where he started a new period of drinking and "confusion." He wrote to his sisters asking them to come to his aid. When Cecilia arrived, he was lying half naked and nearly unconscious on his bed with empty bottles by his side. His hallucinations were pursuing him again. And shortly afterwards Cecilia took him to Görlitz. During his stay at the institution he read intensively and worked on a collection of poems that was later going to mark his poetical debut. Here he did many of his translations of Byron, Burns, and Poe. He was particularly attracted by Poe's "Ulalume." At Görlitz he also intensified his interest in Goethe and Heine. But the poet who meant the most to Fröding was Verner von Heidenstam, in whose *Vallfart och vandringsår* ("Pilgrimage and Years of Wandering") he found inspiration to write in his own style. It also gave him courage to use humor, which was lacking in contemporary literature, underneath which one finds the true feelings of the poet. With this in mind it is not hard to understand his attachment to Shakespeare's Sir John Falstaff.

Gitarr och dragharmonika ("Guitar and Concertina") was published during the spring of 1891 and it was Fröding's first collection of poetry. A large part of the

book was composed in Görlitz. There was a section of Värmland poems in the collection but Fröding caught a general picture of the Swede and his country, while his home area often played a secondary role. They are not as confined to Värmland as Albert Ulrik Bååth's poems are to Skåne (Scania) or Karlfeldt's to Dalarna.

In the autumn of the same year Selma Lagerlöf's *Gösta Berlings Saga* published. Professor Henry Olsson says that she had already become influenced by Fröding. Shortly after his book was published Fröding returned to Karlstad from a stay at a mental institution in Lillehammer, Norway. He found Karlstad spiritually barren, and many of his relatives had died or moved away. It was during this stay in Karlstad that he met "Vivi." She was just over twenty years old and worked as a waitress in a cafe in town. She was kind and friendly to him and "Vivi" gave him the inspiration to write some of his most beautiful poems. His third collection of poetry, *Stänk och flikar* ("Sprinklings and Snippets"), which is considered to be his outstanding one, includes several poems {in which one gets an impression of the poet's picture of Vivi.

When Fröding was reading proofs on his collection *Nya Dikter* ("New Poems") in the spring of 1894, he felt that only Vivi understood him. But his condition was too complicated for her to be able to help him in the long run. He returned to drink and had to be put in the hospital again. When *Stänk och flikar* was to be published in 1896, the minister of justice attempted to stop it on the grounds that it "furthered a degenerate way of life." Although Fröding's work was published without change, this action had a great effect on the poet, and his mental condition took a change for the worse. This episode had a similar effect on Fröding as the *Giftas* ("Married") case had on Strindberg a few years earlier. He no longer believed in his ideas or poetry. As Erik Axel Karlfeldt said: "The law freed him, but what difference did that I make? It was the judge within himself for whom he had to stand trial." During the early stages of his mental battle he lived in Uppsala with his sister Cecilia. By the end of 1898 he was placed in the hospital in Uppsala where he stayed until 1905. During this long period of illness, the Swedish artist Richard Bergh painted a picture of him sitting in his bed, his arms were crossed and he had a large beard, and a Bible on the table by the bed. During these years he became more and more interested in the Bible. His illness is believed to have been schizophrenia.

This was the last long stay he made in a mental institution or hospital. Fröding moved to Djurgården, a section of Stockholm, where he spent the remainder of his life in almost complete isolation. He was described by friends as no longer being aware of life about him. He walked in confusion with his thoughts in another world. Karlfeldt was present at his funeral on February 8, 1911, and Verner von Heidenstam wrote one of his outstanding and best loved poems in memory of Gustaf Fröding. One of the stanzas of the poem reads:

White became your hair. Your beard became long.
The sun shined on the Bible words,
where you sat by your wall
like Job on his mound of ashes and soil.
Man's fate is strangely large.
Dream and saga and foaming stream,
waves and flames and the chorus of storms,
but she is the most brittle tube.

An inferiority complex and self-contempt and a feeling of guilt were things that Gustaf Fröding expressed under a mantle of humor. Because his poetry was written like music, he was compelled to make his own words in many cases. No Swedish poet has ever combined thought and musical poetry with the same amount of success as Fröding. This is also the reason why translations of his works cannot catch the completeness of the original. From out of a life of tragedy, one man's battle to try to understand and fit into his surroundings, has come the "uncrowned king" of Swedish poetry.

Frederic Fleisher
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*From Charles Wharton Stork's translation of *The Dance by the Roadside* by Gustaf Fröding. Copyright the Macmillan Company and The American-Scandinavian Foundation.