

**THE  
LONELINESS  
IN LYDIA  
ERNEMAN'S  
LIFE**

**RUNE CHRISTIANSEN**

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*You will live far from your home and be happy.*

*—Edith Södergran*



**B**efore all else, it should be said that Dagmar Erneman, mother of Lydia Erneman, almost drowned in her late teens when crossing a river on horseback. She had been out for a ride and was going to ford the river at the usual place, but the animal stepped into a hollow between the smooth stones and lost its balance. Dagmar fell under the heavy body, and as they floundered, she hit her head. She was found at dusk by two boys on their way home from a fishing trip. She was lying apparently lifeless on the bank, and the horse was beside her, neighing and pawing the ground with its hooves. It took the boys a few desperate minutes to heave her up across the saddle and take her back to the village. The episode took place in the fifties, in Frankrike in Jämtland, in the north of Sweden, but Dagmar's daughter, Lydia, did not hear about it until many years later, when she was nineteen and sitting eating with her parents. Her mother had set the table out on the terrace. They helped themselves to food straight from the pans and barely exchanged a word until Lydia announced, unexpectedly, that she was going to move. She had been offered a place at the Swedish University of Agricultural Science in

Uppsala down south and wanted to go, as her dream was to become a vet and work with horses, nothing else. Perhaps it was just natural concern, now that Lydia wanted to leave home, that caused Dagmar to grasp her daughter's hands across the table and tell her about this experience from her youth. Lydia looked at her mother and said she knew how to look after herself, but then her father, Johan, said so had her mother, she had been around horses since she learned to walk. Despite their opposition, when the autumn came around, Lydia Erneman left the family farm in Krokomb. She drove all the way to Uppsala in the south and, in the years that followed, passed her exams with brilliant results. She scarcely had time for love, just the odd half-hearted affair, and days could pass between each time she saw her friends. This was not because she was shy or modest, but rather because she was consumed by her studies and the desire to be finished. She wanted to get on, she said, she wanted to work, she longed to fill her life with this work that she loved. She was neither restless nor unhappy in her own company. In fact, it was not unusual for her to think what a good life she had. Of course, she wished she had someone to share her every day with, someone to give herself up to, but this longing was not such that it diminished her existence in any way. She never had to fear being bored. Was she naive in her enthusiasm? No, she was not naive, she was rather level-headed and stubborn.

Her student years passed without Lydia losing patience for even a moment. She was a non-fighter where others struggled, and this irrepressible joy became her identity—her asset, for

want of another word—and when she later applied for a job with the aging vet Carl Magnus Stangel, who ran a prestigious veterinary hospital just outside Tomelilla in Skåne, she already had glowing references from those who had known her at Ultuna, as well as an excellent degree. And Stangel, who trusted his instinct, employed Lydia immediately, almost as soon as he shook her hand. In the weeks that followed, he drove her around the flat, open landscape, so she would get to know the area, and him. It was, for the most part, Stangel who did the talking. Like an Eastern master he told his stories; he spoke at length about the eel's poisonous blood and the import of Holstein cattle to Skåne in the nineteenth century, he described his childhood in Småland and was more than happy to talk about the wild horses—also known as “the horses from the sea”—in the Camargue, where he had lived in younger years, and how wonderful and white they were. One story led to another, and it was the start of what would prove to be a few rich years for Lydia, there in Österlen. But when Stangel retired, Lydia applied for a job at a private veterinary practice in Norway. The clinic was in a rural location some way from the capital and was run by the vet Sigurd Brandt, a man who was in many ways like Stangel. Having shown Lydia around the district, or “parish,” as he called it, he offered her the job. And so Lydia left southern Sweden and moved to the neighbouring country. She bought an old but well-maintained house with a mature Victorian-style garden, with flowers and herbs and berry bushes. There was also a greenhouse, and a wall to protect the garden from the northerly wind, but no