

Two Worlds

By J. P. JACOBSEN

*An English Rendering from the Danish by Hermione
Ramsden*

THE Salzach is not a cheerful river, and there is a peculiar melancholy about the stillness of the poverty-stricken little village on its eastern bank.

TWO
WORLDS

The houses stand close together on the water's edge, like a crowd of miserable beggars who cannot go any further because they have no means of paying their passage across the ferry; their palsied shoulders lean against each other, and they rest their rotten crutches in the muddy stream. The black window panes scowl from under their overhanging roofs at the houses on the opposite side with an expression half hatred, half envy. On the other side the houses are scattered about in picturesque groups of twos and threes, stretching far away over the green plain until they are lost to view in the golden haze of the horizon. But the sunset casts no glow over the little village, it is shrouded in darkness, and the silence is rendered more impressive by the monotonous sound of the river as it flows slowly on, murmuring to itself, sadly and wearily.

The air on the opposite side was filled with the buzzing of the harvest flies, and from time to time a sudden gust of wind would blow them across to die among the willows on the bank.

A boat was coming up the river.

A weak, sickly-looking woman was standing on the balcony of one of the furthest houses. She was shading her eyes with an almost transparent hand, leaning over the parapet to watch the boat which seemed to be sailing upon a mirror of liquid gold.

The woman's white face shone through the dusk as though it had light in itself like the foam which, even on a dark night, whitens the crest of the waves. There was a hopeless look in her anxious eyes, and a curious, vacant smile played about the tired mouth, while the lines on her forehead deepened, causing a look of decision mingled with desperation to cross her face.

The bells in the little village church were beginning to ring.

The woman turned away from the sunlight and rocked her-

TWO
WORLDS

self to and fro, holding her hands to her ears to keep out the sound of the bells, while she murmured to herself as though in answer to the ringing: "I cannot wait, I cannot wait."

But the bells rang on.

She paced backwards and forwards on the balcony as though she were in pain; the lines on her face had grown deeper still, and she drew her breath with difficulty like one who is oppressed with sorrow yet cannot find relief in tears.

For many a long year she had suffered from a painful disease which left her no peace either by night or day. She had consulted all the wise women she knew, she had gone from one holy well to the other, but without success. At last she had joined in the procession on Saint Bartholomew's day, and there she had met an old, one-eyed man who advised her to make a broom of edelweiss and faded rue, of maize and bracken from the churchyard, with a lock of her hair and a piece of wood from a coffin; this she was to throw after a young girl who was strong and healthy, who would come to her through running water. Then the sickness would leave her and cling to the girl.

She had made the broom and concealed it in her dress. A boat was coming up the river, it was the first that had passed since she made the magic wand. She came back to the edge of the parapet; the boat was near enough for her to count the people in it; she could see that there were six people on board and that they looked like foreigners. The boatman stood in the prow with a pole, and there was a lady at the helm with a man by her side who was watching to see that she steered according to the boatman's directions; the others were sitting in the middle of the boat.

The sick woman bent forward; every feature was strained and expectant, and her hand was concealed in her breast. She scarcely breathed as with beating heart, distended nostrils and vacant eyes, she stood waiting for the boat to come.

Already their voices were audible, first only in a faint murmur, then distinctly.

"Luck," said one of them, "is a purely heathen conception. You do not find it once mentioned in the New Testament."

"What about blessedness?"

"Stop," said another. "Of course, it is the ideal of con-

versation to digress, but it seems to me that we should do well to go back to the subject which was first started." TWO
WORLDS

"Very well then, the Greeks——"

"First the Phœnicians."

"What do you know about the Phœnicians?"

"Nothing. But why should the Phœnicians be passed over?"

By this time the boat was just under the house, and at that moment some one lit a cigarette. A blaze of light fell upon the lady in the stern, and lit up her fresh, girlish face, revealing a smile on the parted lips and a dreamy look in the clear eyes, raised heavenward. The light went out, and as the boat sailed by there was a little splash, as of something thrown into the water.

It was about a year later. The sun was setting between two heavy walls of clouds, casting a red glow upon the pale water. A fresh wind swept across the plain; there were no harvest flies, the only sound was the rippling of the river among the rushes. In the distance a boat was seen coming down the stream.

The woman from the balcony was standing on the bank. That day when she had thrown her witch's broom after the young girl she had fallen down in a faint. The violent excitement, aided perhaps by the new parish doctor, had worked a change in her illness, and after passing through a critical interval she began to recover, and a couple of months afterwards she was completely cured. At first she was quite intoxicated with the feeling of health which was so new to her; but it did not last long. She became dejected and troubled in her mind; she was haunted by the image of the young girl in the boat. It rose before her as she had seen it, young and happy; then it knelt down at her feet and looked up at her appealingly. Then a time came when she no longer saw it, and still she knew it was there; it moaned in her bed all the day, and at night she could hear it in the corner of the room. Now she saw it again; it was looking so pale and worn, gazing at her reproachfully with large, unnatural eyes.

This evening she was standing by the brink of the river with a stick in her hand. She was drawing crosses in the soft mud, and more than once she raised herself to listen.

The bells were ringing.

*TWO
WORLDS*

She finished the cross carefully and threw away the stick. Then she knelt down and prayed. Presently she waded into the river up to her waist, folded her hands, and laid herself down in the dark grey waters. The water took her and dragged her into its depths and murmured more sadly than ever as it flowed past the village, past the fields and far away.

By this time the boat was quite near; there were the same young people on board who had helped each other to steer on the former occasion; they were now on their honeymoon. He was sitting in the stern, and she was standing in the middle of the boat, leaning against the mast; she wore a large, grey shawl and a red hat; she was humming a tune.

They came close under the house. She nodded to the man at the helm and looked up at the sky and the floating clouds, as she sang:

By moat invested
 Safe am I nested;
 Art firmly founded, my hall of joy?
 Do ramparts shield thee, so none annoy?
 What see I afar, from the castle keep high
 Darkly and dim where the crimson clouds lie?
 Those shadows I know,
 They gather and grow,
 They wander and go
 Like sad thoughts now banished
 Of sorrows all vanished.
 Ye shadows come, come here and rest
 Within my castle, within my breast,
 Drink from the golden goblet bright
 Here in the halls of radiant light—
 One cup for joy ere yet 'tis here,
 One cup for hopelessness austere,
 Dreams! fill the cup!