

Midsummer in Sweden.

I have visited Sweden three times, once in June and twice in August. June is by far the best time to visit it. In Sweden spring is not as in England, long and slow, but short and quick. Helen, Signe and I went there in early June and we were in the right mood for such a journey. The four years of war had passed and also the first years of recovery. My work in the Studio had been given up and I could get away during the glory of the summer. Helen, who had been Head of Dartford Heath Training College during the strain of the war time had now resigned her post and she also could get away. Signe Laven managed to get off her work early and she took little Ursula, her niece, so we four started off to see something of Sweden. We planned to stay on the coast first, to go North to Leksand in Dalecarlia, where we should see the Midsummer Festivities at their best and then spend the rest of our holiday in Saltjöbaden near Stockholm.

We made our way to Sweden by Germany passing through the Island of Rügen and reaching Sweden at Malmö. We boarded the train that was to take us to Gothenberg. The fresh cleanliness of the paint in Sweden has always pleased me, but it astonished me on this my first arrival. The carriages of our train were

painted white inside and as I leaned out of my window I was lost in admiration at seeing an apparently freshly painted white signal box. I had never seen a clean one before. We arrived in Gothenberg in the sunshine of early morning. Trams painted white and Cambridge blue ran along the streets and each one looked as if it were well scrubbed every morning.

That evening ~~XXXX~~ we were to have supper at a restaurant as guests of Gustav, Signe's brother. When we were conducted to our table we found it spread with 27 little dishes of various delicacies. Gustav looked at the display with evident dissatisfaction. He said with a sigh - "Things are not as they used to be. This is a poor Smergosfood!" "Poor ! we exclaimed, "with a choice of 27 dishes !" "There should have been more" he replied. "In the old days for a supper there would have been ~~50~~."

The next day we went to a seaside place not far from Gothenberg. I had expected to have a dip in the sea all among the strangely rounded rocks of the shore but apparently that was not the thing to do. We went to a building and there we were each conducted to a little room with a large bath in it full not only of warm seawater but also of long ribands of slippery brown-green seaweed. A woman came in. I was not only startled by her entrance which was unexpected, but I felt nervous of her. I guessed what she had come in to do and she looked alarmingly strong. I heard afterwards that both men and women wishing for a seaweed bath must needs pass under the hands of

these hefty matrons. I have read in old legends of heros being bathed by "maidens". Were those "maidens" mighty mothers of the bathroom as this one was? The nurse of Ulysses was she as strong? My "maiden" scrubbed me with seaweed and a brush very hard. When she was satisfied cold water was dashed over me and I was rubbed with hot towels. Then I felt cleaner than I had ever felt in my life.

That evening we were to have supper with the mother of one of our Swedish girl friends. Our hostess could not talk English but she made us most pleasantly welcome. We sat down to supper and a lordly dish was brought in under a big cover. The cover was taken off and behold many crimson lobsters lay on the dish. A lobster for each person! It was a glorious sight but being a small eater especially of shellfish I confess I was rather frightened. I must have looked so for I had such warning glances from Helen and Signe that I attacked my lobster with as much appearance of ease and pleasure as I could muster.

The next day we took a steamer to Marstrand, a charming sea side place. It does not face the open sea but an arm of it and in full view is a long island with boat building works on it and a high windmill painted bright red. Behind the little town, and so large that all the houses seem to lie in its lap, is an old castle. It is built on the dreary looking barrage of stones that skirt that part of the West coast of Sweden. Treeless and unclothed by any herbage/~~the~~ ^{those} huge rounded rocks

lie along the shore looking as though collected by the giant gods as cobbles for paving the way to some mighty dun. Round the back of the castle lie these boulders and through them, forming little pools, run streams of fresh water to the sea. In the pools the women of Marstrand wash their clothes and so massive are the boulders and the castle walls that the women look like bright insects fluttering amongst them.

After a week at Marstrand we went North to Leksand in Dalecarlia. The district round Leksand was already known to me through the pictures of Zorn and Carl Larssen and I found it quite familiar. We arrived on the 22 of June. People were gathering for the festivities. There was an insufficient number of rooms in the town for the visitors and we were lucky to find one bedroom in a guest house. It was a very large room which took in four of us easily. It was an assembly room but it was very plainly and scantily furnished and was on the ground floor. The landlady put three beds into it and Ursula slept on the sofa. Although we were quite comfortable we had a disturbed night. We were, of course unaccustomed to the fact that up in Dalecarlia such a thing as night at that time of the year does not exist and the Swedish people at Midsummer do not think much of bed, so movement and conversation go on. Bees and queen wasps also dont go to sleep and, as a queen wasp would insist on trying to make herself a nest in Ursula's old wooden couch and would not be caught, we were obliged at last to shut out the wasp

and the lilac-scented air and also - perhaps to our relief - the merry noises as well.

In the morning we wandered about the town now full of flashing colour from the scarlet, black, white, green and orange national costumes. The clear Northern sun shone on the silver ornaments of the women and added a glitter to the colour. Ursula wore her orange national costume. All little girls in Sweden wear, up to a certain age, a dress of orange colour. Signe possessed a scarlet, black and white costume. Helen and I wished to have one so we went to the National costume shop and bought them choosing the Leksand style. I still treasure mine although I have not the ghost of a right to wear it. In our wanderings to the centre of the town we saw, laid down by the side of the street, the 50 foot pole which would soon be decorated with wreaths and garlands of flowers. It would be raised at twelve o'clock on Midsummer night.

When we returned to our guest house for luncheon we found an old fiddler, Rolicks Per, playing to the guests in the garden. He was dressed in a well worn national suit. His shirt was embroidered, his full long coat was greenish grey, he had yellow breeches and dangling scarlet-tipped garters kept up his woolen stockings. He wore a cap of blue shaped like an old fashioned nightcap. His hair was rather long and bobbed. He played well and had charming manners. He was asked to join the guests at lunch and he played national tunes to us afterwards in the sit-

ting room which happened to form a suitable background for him. All the pieces of furniture as well as the walls were painted with figures in the traditional Swedish style.

When he left we went to watch the people from the villages round arriving by the lake steamer. Leksand is built on the shores of Lake Sijan, a large and beautiful piece of water. The villagers did not bring much luggage with them. Many would not trouble to hire a room having every intention of dancing all night - or at any rate enjoying themselves in other ways than sleep. They gathered in a little wood that lay on the further side of the river that runs into the lake and which could be reached by a bridge from the town. The bridge was very picturesque being irregular in outline with openwork arcs of wood bordering it. The whole of it was painted scarlet. The groups of people dressed in such strong colours looked fine as they crossed the sunlit bridge and settled themselves among the birches and pines. I made a study of them in the flickering light and shade but only a Scandinavian artist could do the scene justice. At any rate, even if I failed, I made a record of the old scarlet bridge which I hear no longer exists. It has been replaced by a modern one in cement ! Even if a new bridge in wood had been built it could not have had the traditional charm of the old one. While I was working I had rather a surprise. A party of black-dresses Salvation Army preachers came over and established themselves among the glittering figures. They would have

looked all right in a London street. Here they were utterly incongruous yet I put them into my drawing.

Helen roused me from my work and we walked back to the town and went to the field where they were preparing for an open air play to be acted to next night. The play they were going to act was to be ~~the~~ "The Bride's Crown" by Strindberg. They were preparing for it in a grassy hollow almost like a small amphitheatre. Some men had cut down young birch trees and were sticking them upright in the ground in the middle of the bottom of the hollow. On each side of the birch trees had been erected sheds like country cottages. We looked forward to seeing the play although neither Helen nor I would understand it, not knowing Swedish.

After resting at our guest house we sallied out again at about eleven o'clock to see the raising of the pole. Though late there was a fine sunset going on and this continued until it could be called sunrise. It was quite light. The pole, decorated with wreaths, still lay on the ground with men standing near it ready for the word that would tell them the hour of twelve. The Mayor was ready, the musicians too. We had our places not far from where the pole would stand. Somehow the waiting for midnight was exciting. At last the hour was told. With a cry from the onlookers the pole was hoisted upright. The National Anthem was sung, a speech made by the Mayor and song after song was sung. After the singing was over the young people and many of the older ones went to dance up and down the scarlet

bridge until the sunset-sunrise colouring in the sky became the clear light of day. The Midsummer festivities of Sweden are, I am told, a remnant of the worship of the goddess Sæa whose name is incorporated in that of the country. It is a form of old sun worship.

Next day we spent in an expedition to see the villages round. We saw Ravik and Mora, beloved by their famous artists Zorn and Carl Larssen. Both villages are on the shore of Siljan. We called on a friend of Signe's who lives in a very old and very beautiful ~~house~~ wooden house looking over the lake. Most of the older wooden houses of Sweden are exceedingly well proportioned and the wide gabled porches forming an open room have an almost classic beauty. The house we visited was the finest I had seen. It was owned by a woman sculptor. The garden stretched down towards the lake and of course there were plenty of lilac trees round it. Lilac trees grow everywhere in that district and they were in full bloom. They were in fields, cropping up occasionally among the sharp spikes of the Swedish fences, as well as in the gardens.

In the evening we went to see the acting of Strindberg's play. The sunset-sunrise, quiet and unchanging, gave a sad and eerie play a sad and eerie atmosphere. I can remember clearly and I shiver now - as I did when I saw her - the witchlike old temptress luring the wretched girl to commit her crime in the wood. I did not stay to see the end of the play. The boards on which we sat were supported on trestles and boxes placed on

the sloping ground. They were anything but steady and my back began to ache so I retreated to my sorrow and loss.

But all was not loss. I walked back through the grove of trees and on this night the dancing was taking place on an open floor at the end of the grove. The light from the strong electric lamps round the dancing floor and from the lamps in the grove fought with the hot glow from the sunset and with the blue colour reflected from the western sky. The young green of the trees caught the contrasting tints. Men and women were walking about the grove and the effect, owing to their rich dress, was fairylike.

The next day most of the visitors left the town. We took a pleasure trip on the steamer that was to take them back to the different villages. The steamer was so crowded that at first we were forbidden to move an inch from where we sat or stood for with any concerted movement an accident might easily have occurred. The result of this was that I was able to get coloured chalk drawings done of the people in their village costumes. They had to keep absolutely still and they were apparently pleased to feel that their stillness could be of use. I was sorry when, party by party, they were landed and the boat was left all but empty.

In the afternoon we stood on the platform of the little station which was at the end of Lake Siljan. We were going to take the train South to Stockholm and, while waiting for it, I

made my last drawing of the lake and said good-bye to it and to
Leksand. I have been twice afterwards to Stockholm but not to
Leksand. Is it perhaps as well that I have not been there again?
The weather then was perfect. Can the festivities for ever go
on in the same way? Will the songs round the pole be sung now
with the same rush of enthusiasm as on that night? Anyhow some
spirit poured beauty over those days ~~and~~ and we were there to
catch it.