



PARIS OF THE NORTH

Birger Sjöberg died in 1929 at the early age of 43. Fortunately he left to Swedish literature a charming and amusing picture of small-town life in **Fridas Bok**, *Frida's Book*, (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1922), which consists of a preface and a collection of verse set to music. In the book he has captured the setting, the atmosphere, the emotions, and the attitudes of the time. However, *Frida's Book* is not simply an accurately observed account of a period in the life of a small town. With gentle irony he records the petty conceits and posturings which have long characterized mankind and show no sign of abating.

Although Birger Sjöberg himself said that he had ample material in his head for a second volume, a sequel was never written. His next work was the successful novel **Kvartetten som sprängdes**, *The Quartet that broke up*, followed by a volume of sombre and at times obscure verse, **Kriser ocb kransar**, *Crises and Chaplets*.

The reader can clearly visualize Little Paris with its steeply falling canal flowing strongly out into the lake, tearing and pulling at the small boats moored along its lower banks. We recognize the cosy domesticity of Frida's home. Frida and her unnamed suitor are familiar to us all — perhaps in some cases uncomfortably so. Both they and the other inhabitants of Little Paris are the more real for their failings. There is no grand sweeping landscape, no major historical event, no comprehensive study of the human soul. The habits and customs of the opening

years of this century are succinctly embodied in references to a multitude of minor pleasures. The scale of *Frida's Book* is undeniably small, but delicately and exquisitely so.

INTRODUCTION TO FRIDA'S BOOK

The grass glistened in the sunlight the first time he met Frida. Behind them the drowsy little town lay heavy-lidded in Sunday torpor, lulled by the lapping wavelets of the Canal on which rowing-boats were drifting slowly out into open water.

There is little to be gained from a cascade of words on the subject of the handclasps subsequently exchanged, the tender moments that followed that momentous event. It very soon became clear to him that Frida was the loveliest, noblest and worthiest of the innumerable females that swarmed over the verdant surface of this Earth. While he stood in the dust of the daily round, expeditiously and good-naturedly biting through string, deftly and capably forming packages into various unlikely shapes, or twirling paper into cones like miniature horns of plenty into which the Goddess of Indulgence was about to pour her red and white blandishments, his thoughts often wandered across the wide square. They made their way to the little side street shaded by lime trees, where the flax-haired and pink-skinned Frida lifted the enormous cash ledger in her small but firm hands or bent her crimped head in thought over the cold black copy press. Both thus occupied positions in the economic hierarchy of this world that were modest and subordinate, but important in their own way. However, for him there was always the vision of being able to take an upward stride, of one day having his own shop — yes, he could often see its pale blue sign with gold lettering, swinging back and forth in the wind. However, the sight was confined to his imagination, for he enjoyed a certain ability to perceive clearly things which no human hand can hold — certainly a strong point when he made his poetic and scientific pronouncements to Frida, but equally a failing in a world of reality which presents the roughest of edges. Although he was by nature, then, somewhat inward-looking, it seldom happened that he gave the wrong change to customers and he was always anxious to appear courteous, correct, and ambitious — qualities which were amply rewarded by the Manager, albeit less in the form of cold coin than by a few words of promise.

The Town Councillor — there were probably several, but only one thus dominantly incorporated, who was now in his 64th year and exercised the most

extreme influence, the greatest power — would occasionally remark when making one small purchase or another, "In your shop one is served by presentable people with sound views — I like that." This praise, so liberally bestowed by the important man, gave him particular pleasure, for a good word from a superior person readily and swiftly spreads a satisfying warmth in the human heart. For a long uninterrupted span of years the Councillor's power remained unbroken; then violent storms arose, the seat of power creaked and rocked, a blazing battle ensued against the entrenched position of this man of power. With a certain instinctive gratitude his thoughts were always on the Councillor's side, although a wave of resentment could now and then sweep through even his breast, when traces of the heavy hand, imperturbably compelling, could be descried in certain areas where it was thought the grass might have been left to grow freely in the sun. (As was the case, for example, over the affair of the baths building.) But if a low murmur of discontent did at times hover round the Councillor, the voice of recognition could also often be heard — and this usually making the sound of an expression of respect and deference. For it was commonly accepted, notwithstanding any bitterness, that this man's grey eyes gazed with affection on "Little Paris" — the name the Councillor himself had bestowed upon the town on a certain official occasion in order thereby vastly and instantaneously to increase its stature and to bolster the pride of its inhabitants in erecting specific buildings within its boundaries for the benefit of themselves and their descendents.

And anyway, Little Paris was worthy of their deep affection. The town wore the beauty of tranquillity when the misty stars twinkled above the Doctor's white villa in the Spring, when the Milky Way sparkled as it lay strung out from the Factory to well beyond the Square, giving every appearance of being fastened to the flagpole outside the Councillor's house. The beauty of Little Paris was especially bland when summer with its soft hand had scattered flowers over the lawns and with a good-natured puff of wind had caused the lime trees in the park and the poplars in the gardens to bow their heads, or when the rowing-boats were parted from the quayside in the narrow canal and carried out by short-tempered little waves to the open waters of the lake where they encountered small steamers chugging along and slow-moving barges. Little Paris took on a wild beauty when autumn released its leaves, yellow as fire, and the dark heaving of the lake sent sailing barges and yachts scurrying into harbour, when the small steamers clustered together, anxiously pouring smoke from their funnels as the storm raged and a close veil of rain hung over the streets, parks and round the gloomy Cholera graveyard, strewn with cracked headstones.

On afternoons of rough weather like those Frida could be found quietly occupied in her peaceful home, visited by her friend and mentor, while in a neighbouring room her mother flicked one drop of water after another over the crumpled washing waiting to be mangled. In this home he was received with warmth as an esteemed guest; his benignity won him the approval even of her austere father, a former corporal in the Norrland military corps who now held a post as security guard in the harbour. He was also received with amity by her volatile brother, somewhat inclined to instability, but otherwise a vigorous young agent for electrical fittings, and with admiration by her younger sister who at the age of 15 was still under her mother's wing and a passably talented singer (she would frequently break into song with "I wonder who's kissing you now?"). His strongly romantic nature, his fund of knowledge growing with the passage of time gradually invested his person with a certain aura. Like his brother — an inoffensive relief teacher at the Gård municipal school — he had in fact developed a warmth of feeling for books, a noble instinct which with the inexorability of the laws of nature first brought him into intimate contact with the town lending library and later, as his monthly salary grew larger, led him to become an enthusiastic and grateful subscriber to the Nordic Home Encyclopaedia. The diverse information he acquired, the pictures his imagination conjured up, he laid them all before Frida like fruits beautiful to behold, easily consumed, but each one concealing wisdom and worldly experience. Presumably it was right that, as he read various literary works, he should derive increasing satisfaction from discoveries he made concerning the structure of the universe and other noteworthy phenomena. It is certainly true that this gratification gradually put out within him a healthy young shoot of self-satisfaction, that it was possible for him occasionally to be seized with a slight sense of giddiness and contentment at comprehending certain things in this world of which he had previously been less aware. But, where Frida was concerned, the superiority he felt found outlet in the gentlest way and as if not to swamp her head with waves of knowledge that were too powerful or overwhelming, he opened the floodgates of wisdom's clear waters with consideration and a smile.

Frida listened round-eyed, possibly less to the content of what was being said than to his well-meaning voice as it discoursed with varying pitch and tone on Nature, Death or the Universe. She was a tender-hearted and by no means impractical woman — like her mother! — and was therefore not always able to follow him on his ethereal journeyings; it sometimes happened that she downed him in mid-flight, that with an unduly mundane comment she brought him to earth. But with a sense of fruition he noted, however, that at times Frida adopted his own manner of speaking, that the seeds he sowed were not scattered in vain,

that by-and-large Frida was a devoted listener. Thus on their many walks in Little Paris and its green surroundings they were accompanied both by the winged God of Love with his burning cheek and the earnest Spirit of Knowledge with pale and nobly gleaming brow.

Nevertheless the ardour and healthy fervour of youth were no strangers to their hearts. When the Temperance Movement drum reverberated on a dewy Sunday morning outside the Good Templars' Building, when little Gustafsson with his black beard raised his enormous bass tuba in the June sunshine, when the blue banner with its huge terrestrial globe swelled in the wind they made every effort to be there; they scrambled, too, among the slippery pine needles of the picnic spot, fished for gleaming brooches and thermometers decorated with small forget-me-nots in the fishpond, rode on the Wheel of Justice, swung on pliant trees and watched indefatigable dancers living life to the full on the dance floor. Equally they made their way on occasion to the garden of the local Guest House where the Müller-Bezack quartet (three good strings and a piano) gave their concerts; in the darker months of the year they allowed a dazzling stream of images to pass before their eyes at the local picture palace and listened to instructive lectures at the Institute.

However, eventually his clear if somewhat light, almost baritone voice was to open the way for him to join the town's choral society which, following the merger of the two mutually opposed quartets "Key to the Heart" and "Little Paris Choral Union", adopted the unifying and conciliatory name of "The Fraternal Voices U.C.S. (United Choral Societies)". The conflict between the two quartets which had threatened totally to destroy the town's musical life, was thus brought to an end and peace ensued, a number of thinning-out exercises took place and after a meeting (at which various suggestions were put forward including the proposal that the new choir should be given the title "Brotherhood and Forgiveness", abbreviated to "B.F.s" — a proposal rejected with derision by a large majority — the Fraternal Voices Choral Society, imbued with the strength of unity gave well-attended performances before the grateful audiences of Little Paris.

From the point at which he becomes a member of their quartet a new Banner of Glory streams over his head, no longer the blue banner with its terrestrial globe. Here the God of true festivity raises both standard and glass as the song swells and thunders. The consciousness of belonging to this formal band of black-clad figures whose creaking dickeys, rubicund cheeks and ever-brimming glasses of punch filled him with a sense of occasion and "festivitas" (to use the expression

employed by the leading tenor Fritz Gyllberg) greatly strengthened his self-confidence and substantially increased his dawning awareness of his own worth. The heart-moving notes of the songs in which tender words about Nature, her beautiful skies, her dusk, her dew, her stars, waterfalls, flowers and birds all found their place also held something that greatly charmed and attracted his soul. Unfortunately, however, in spite of the merger and in spite of the name "Fraternal Voices" they had not succeeded in banishing the demon of dissent from the halls of song; before long new rumblings are heard, a fermenting dissatisfaction develops, not least because of the frequently encountered indispositions and commonly over-presumptuous behaviour of the pampered Mr. Gyllberg. He noted with genuine sorrow in his heart that the feelings in the breasts of his fellow singers did not match the assertions of "true brothers", "merry musicians", "noble sentiments" etc. which rang out in emphatic four-voiced unison beneath the fluttering banner of the Choral Society. But throughout his mute unhappiness, amid the tottering walls of crumbling illusions, he stood his ground loyally gazing upwards, hoping for oil to still troubled waters. Ambitious, helpful and not a bad singer, although sometimes referred to by the nightingale of the quartet as its "sleeping member", he was at length entrusted with the responsibility of keeping the Choral Society's song sheets or being its "Notary" and certainly the Society could never have found a more dependable individual for that onerous post than this particular serious-minded and romantically-inclined young singer.

However, no matter how he rose in status, how he grew and shone, Frida still held her place in his heart. He did not discard his love nor put aside the Nordic Encyclopaedia to gather dust in neglect; he forgot neither the way to the lending library nor the way to his beloved's home. Firmly bound by the bonds of love he and his Frida spent the years of their youth together under the protection of the powerful hand of the Councillor beneath the incomparably blue sky of Little Paris over which the clouds scurried and changed positions like his own thoughts and in which the great Bear and the Milky Way and all the other stars, both moving and fixed, constantly reminded him of the vastness of the Universe, its abundance and its beauty.

Birger Sjöberg 1922

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