

THE VOICE OF A CHILD

BY MABEL G. JACKSON

BLACK clouds scudded furiously across the sky and the waves of the leaden sea ran high as hilltops. The sound of one striking against the ship's bottom suggested more the impact with a rock than with a liquid, shifting mass. Hardened travellers made brave attempts to look unconcerned, but only to those tormented by qualms of discomfort did the mere physical danger appear a matter of minor importance.

As the German shore came within sight I left the stuffy, overcrowded saloon that was noisy with the breaking of dishes and the groans of miserable humankind. My spirit cried aloud for purity of air and strained at the leash of the material. But an ascent of the steep stair to the out-of-doors and tempest brought me upon a scene of greater wretchedness than that witnessed below. A hundred small forms were huddled on the open deck in abject misery, and the planks were slippery not only from dashing spray and driving rain, but from frequent testimonials to rough weather and ill ease.

I stood aghast, clinging to the glistening, dripping rail. Then open-eyed with wonder I watched the little act set on the impromptu stage. From out of the thronging masses of childhood a woman's form stood forth, bravely, energetically, cheerfully. Enveloped in a rain-sodden ulster, with a shabby cap atop hair from which not all the clinging moisture could extract the life and curl, she moved continually here and there, relieving as best she could the needs of her small charges and attempting by force of example to hold them to a presentable standard of endurance.

"The least discouraged person I've met today", thought I, and marvelled at the optimism of that young female thing to whose

hands and head and heart more than three score child beings had been entrusted.

"Now then," she called in a loud, clear voice, "all together! So you will avoid colds. Arms out,—so! Arms up,—so!"—suiting the gesture to the word. "Now, one, two, three, jump!"

The surging, swaying crowd of children did their utmost to follow her lead in calisthenics and self-control, bumping one against the other, sliding on the slippery deck, straining small bodies and weak wills to commendable effort. Some even laughed. But the laugh seemed but the ghost of the spontaneity usually connected with childhood. It was a faint, wraith-like thing that twisted the pale lips, contorted the white faces, and played like a shadow around the deep-set, sorrowful eyes. The restraint of those faces, the questioning of those eyes, were hard to meet.

"War children!" whispered a steward with pity over all his features and a haunting memory in his grey eyes, "little ones born under the cloud of war, little ones whose infancy was dragged through the mire of it. Been in Sweden, they have, for the summer, to escape starvation, to seek for health. Bless the Swedes, I say," he muttered, dashing one hand across twitching eyelids and unsteady lips.

To welcoming ears came the whistles' glad signal of arrival. There ensued the customary grating and bumping against a waiting pierhead, the merciful stillness of the element beneath us, the stentorian shouting of orders and the shriller shouting of greeting, the distant shriek of a railway train, the thud of a gangway and the tramp of hurrying feet. I joined the jostling throng, the burden of my luggage in my hands, a heavier burden in my heart.

The train was bitterly cold and strangely bare, denuded of all ornamentation and brass. Even the window curtains had disappeared. To find a compartment to myself had become an ambition since witnessing that painful scene on the slippery deck. But I searched in vain. Evidently thrift or poverty had dictated the smallest number of carriages compatible with actual necessity.

Effort at last succeeded in discovering one with but a single occupant, a woman. At first, at all events, I thought she was alone. But soon it became evident that to her belonged the small boy who was running in the passage of the train like some wild creature just loosed, inspecting the view from every window, examining every compartment, trying the opening and closing powers of every door.

And it seemed that for the time being he was new to her, forgetful of her past sway, mindful only of freshly-acquired habits and customs, an unfamiliar sprite accustomed to the wide limits of the out-of-doors and nature, one of those children who had come from Sweden, one of those shivering, jumping, laughing little beings on the slippery deck, one of the number saved from starvation, or,— I glanced with question at the lithe, straight limbs,—or from worse. Had there been some dread danger working for the ruin of that youthful body, for the handicapping of the human soul, the divine possibilities of the intrepid spirit? I began to understand the sadness of the young mother draped in black, the pathetic anxiety of the pale, set face, the tension, the melancholy, that enveloped her. As my thoughts directed my gaze toward the slender, sternly upright figure, I started. There was a distinctly hostile gleam in the dark and hopeless eyes looking into mine. I began to feel as if a word were blazoned on my clothes and stamped upon my brow, the short word "enemy". And every one of its five letters scorched me, searing my heart and soul.

"The boat was late," I murmured helplessly.

She hesitated, then answered with curt decision.

"Very. I had been waiting two and a half hours."

Did she feel resentment, as if in some latent way I had been responsible even for the delay in the child's coming? Having spoken she removed both glance and attention, leaving me in an almost tangible isolation. Her thoughts, her words, were occupied with the restlessness and obstinacy of the child who was still exploring the train corridor, oblivious of being an obstruction to passengers and luggage.

But when the train started, slowly and laboriously as if feeling in every bolt and beam the age and ruin outwardly visible, the boy seated himself reluctantly between his parent and the window. The independence to which he had become accustomed during months of absence was most apparent, and the mother's attempts to re-establish the old, familiar footing were pathetic to witness. He edged shyly away from her caresses and vouchsafed no response to her affectionate words or glances. His surroundings, however, he eyed with curiosity, and finally bent upon me such a cool, relentless gaze that I felt like a caricature of myself, like the result of the artistic efforts of a child, two rude, round holes for eyes, ob-

long, bulbous figure of a nose, uneven, unlippped semblance of a mouth.

In vain did his mother seek to divert his attention toward objects along the line of travel. Apparently he desired to fathom a strange something in the face and figure of his vis-a-vis, perhaps he even felt a kind of kinship on account of his recent foreign experience.

But at last he was either satisfied or weary of examination. Turning impulsively to the woman who had waited with subdued patience, he began to talk,—rapidly, unceasingly, restless in his speech as in his actions,—and framing all his words in Swedish. Evidently she did not understand and in low tones made an appeal for the language they possessed in common. He paid no attention, eseming not to perceive in the rapid fire of childish description that his words were unintelligible to the eagerly listening ears. All manner of questions were those she asked, hungry as she was to become familiar with her son's immediate past in which there had been no part or presence of herself. He understood and answered readily and in detail, but always in the foreign tongue that was as Greek to her. A pained expression stole over the sad face, the hopeless look in her dark eyes deepened.

I could endure no longer the little tragedy. When a particularly urgent question brought only an incomprehensible response, I leaned forward.

"Your son," I said gently, "says he had one or two good playmates and that as a rule they came to him at the farm."

A swift glance of gratitude met the translation. It seemed as if the mantle of aloofness and enmity had slipped a trifle.

Then began a torrent of question, answer, and interpretation. The child's speech was vivid, his observation had been keen. Of necessity I was made a party to intimate scenes of family life and affection. Events of farm life, strange customs, homely or civic celebrations, were all pictures. Every word and gesture glowed with the color of enthusiasm. And little by little the mother's face assumed a look of content. Once again she was able to measure her step to that of the boy, once again to enter the details of his daily life.

At last the young narrator showed definite signs of weariness. Indeed to me it had long been apparent that his restlessness, his super-activity, were in reality but the result of the fatigue and ner-

vous strain of an unusual experience. His day had begun early and had been crammed with hardship and adventure. Now his head drooped, his figure slouched in the yawning arms of the slippery seat. But true to his inborn instinct of vivacity he pulled himself upright and protested with a little jerk the demand of sleep.

I watched his manly struggle and pity dimmed my eyes. The mother would have pillowed his head upon her arm, but the youthful farmer, the experienced traveller, spurned the blandishment of such comfort. The dusk had gathered. A light in the roof of the compartment flared to meet its challenge, but after a little sputtered and died away, leaving a dark place of spaced black shapes shrunk with chill and discomfort. The sky flaunted a last, faint streamer of sunset red. One by one the stars appeared like spikes in the crevices of a deep cavern.

The boy nestled close against his mother. The darkness had recalled his discarded childhood. Again she sought to provide a comfortable resting place for his restless head. She suggested knee or arm, but instantly his dignity rose on the defensive and he withdrew to the corner of the hard seat. Instinctively he searched for the comfort of a cushion, moving impatiently back and forth.

The mother gazed hopelessly about her. Aware of her longing and quandary I impetuously extended my great fur muff.

"Oh no," she gasped, "no, it would be ruined."

"And if so," I answered with a laugh to re-assure her, "if so, it would be in a good cause. But you underestimate its powers of endurance."

"Thank you, thank you," she breathed, and in her low voice I heard the emotion I could not see for the darkness.

Impressed with the novelty of such a cushion, the child slipped down to the level of his mother's knee. For a time silence reigned except for the chug-chugging of the train and the sound of voices rising at intervals above it. I thought the boy had succumbed to the weariness caused by the long day, by the travel, by the soporific influence of the darkness. But then I heard him speaking in low, dreamy tones as if his voice were trailing over memories of the past. And the words were of his native speech, the speech shared by his mother. The stillness, the gloom, the warmth and comfort of his improvised bed had made him the little child of the days before the long journey northward, before the experiences in a new land, in a strange family circle. He dwelt among reminiscences of his

own home, of the friends of his infancy, he recalled the kiss of joy, the sting of sorrow. He touched upon the little festal gatherings, the glamour of the Christmas season, the light of the birthday candles.

And then came silence. The train rattled on. The great stars glimmered through the bared windows.

Suddenly the child's voice rang out in agonized poignancy. Was he dreaming, had unconsciousness brought him to the brink of his soul?

"Mother, mother, I want my father!"

The black, still figure that was his mother sat motionless.

"Hush, dear, hush," she murmured.

But the child cried out again.

"Mother, mother, shan't I see my father any more? Not even at Christmas time?"

And again the low, tense voice made answer, "Hush, dear one, hush!"

The boy, however, went on as if awakening had brought self-control, yet rambling still between impulse and fact, between fancy and knowledge.

"Oh mother, see the big stars! Is my father up there among the stars? Oh, why did my father have to die? Mother, you know how good my father always was, to you, to me, to everybody. Why did the dear God take him away? Why can't he come back to us, if only for a little while, if only for Christmas time? Oh, mother, if I am very good, if I ask the dear God very sweetly, very kindly, won't He send my father down to me, down, down, on the light of one of His shining stars? Mother, dear, dear mother, I want my father!"

I could not see for the darkness. But had the carriage been flooded with light perhaps I had not seen for the veil of tears before my eyes. As I heard the sound of a dry, a choking sob, I felt instinctively that nevermore would memory be able to free itself from such a note of anguish. The dark figure of the woman was bent above the child and I knew he was being gathered close in a straining hold. A low murmur of voices followed and presently silence. Evidently the child was asleep. Somehow, as the train jogged steadily on, the motionless of the tense form opposite made a pitiful appeal for companionship and sympathy. In sudden response I leaned forward. It needed tact and the evidence of a communicative spirit to win the confidence of one so enwrapped in

constraint. What had laid such a cloak about her? I could not tell. No word of hers had betrayed the clue to her great and overwhelming sadness.

I spoke of many things, I spoke long and eagerly; of trivial incidents, of life in many countries, of literature and art. And continually I was conscious of the cloak of enmity that hid her soul from me. Then I spoke of the sorrows of others, of sorrows that had no end, but tangled as they were with query and with problem knew no solution; of griefs that paced beside one like solemn sentinels clogging the footsteps, restraining the spirit. And reluctantly I laid bare the wound in my own soul. Through the darkness I heard a gasp. It was followed by words of sympathy in soft and heard a gasp. It was followed by words of sympathy in soft and unfamiliar tones. I parried commiseration.

"Have you never thought," I asked, "that sorrow not only takes, but gives? With the burden that is laid upon one, with the weight of shackles, there is something else, the wisdom of a head that can understand, the warmth of a heart that can feel. Is it not worth the pain, to know the world, to love the world, in spite of all failure, all error, all injustice? Why should a chasm yawn between God's peoples? Why should they look with abhorrence, with hatred, across the depths of bitter enmity? Is there nothing to bridge that cleft of their own wilful making? Is suffering then of no avail? Can it not unseal the lips and hearts? Will it not open wide the arms?"

I closed my eyes as though I would shut out the picture I had conjured. And suddenly it seemed as if an angel wrestled with an ugly spirit brooding in the darkness. The child stirred and a voice rang through the carriage, a voice buoyant and joyful, youthful, yet strangely mature and confident.

"Oh mother, mother, such a dream, such a wonderful dream! My father came to me. The dark sky opened and the light of a star made a splendid, shining pathway. And down that pathway came my father, straight to me. I saw him, mother, and his face was shining. He spoke to me, mother dear, he spoke. 'Be happy, son,' he said, 'and tell your mother to be happy too.' And then,—oh mother, he said '*forgive*'. What made him say that, mother dear? Can you tell me? And then he went away again. But somehow, mother, I am not unhappy any more. My heart feels all bright, mother dear, as if my father had left some of the light of his beauti-

ful star. But what made my father say '*forgive*'? I don't hate anyone. Once at the farm Anders and I had a fight, a horrid fight. But when it was over we shook hands. Both of us had been fighting, and somehow, mother,"—the clear, childish voice dragged and stumbled a little over the confession he was making—"somehow I knew when his hand touched mine that I too had been at fault. Not only Anders, mother, not only Anders. Do you think that feeling was forgiving?"

The mother bent over her child, and in the darkness an ugly, evil shape arose and fled.