

# Birger Sjöberg lyrics

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# The Butterfly at Haga

Translated by Helen Asbury

I'm thinking of a song that I was humming  
while waves were strumming  
with their sun-spangled spray at our white boat.  
The headland lay in flow'r to us was coming  
the summer's warmth to where we lay afloat.  
This little song, in notes like faint wings beating  
told of the butterfly o'er Haga fleeting.

We drifted on the water, clear and flowing;  
the oars were sewing  
silver eye-lets ere they dove in wavelets cool.  
And dreams of eighteenth century were blowing  
across my thoughts like ripples on a pool  
till I forgave its vain and foolish measure  
for Haga's sake and Haga's Rose of Pleasure.

I watched the bubbles dance as they came flying,  
and on them lying  
as on cushions, tiny water-gods were seen.  
But Frida sat and smiled, her needle plying  
just looking bright and rosy and serene.  
She didn't see the shapes about us washing  
like naiads in the lake of Haga plashing.

I saw joyful time, through thought's blue hazing.  
The Poet's phrasing  
of the "speech of friendly lutes" I could command.  
Then Frida asked a question so amazing:  
"Was not this poet hard to understand?"  
I couldn't speak, not caring to deny  
I simply sang of Haga's butterfly.

My feelings I subdued by humming lowly.  
The wavelets slowly  
rocked our boat and whispered in the summer breeze.  
Then came a butterfly, enchanting wholly,  
on Frida's cheek he sunned himself at ease.  
With this caress, so charming and so fleeting  
he brought the Haga butterfly's sweet greeting.

# The Canals on Mars

Translated by Helen Asbury

On a cloudless eve, while cooling winds refresh us  
With a lovely scent I cannot rightly name,  
Thoughts about the small canals of Mars enmesh us,  
As upon a bench we sit, and I declaim:  
"Are we really sure then?" No, I cannot swear it.  
But perhaps through reeds all pale and queerly stained  
Strange a ship may pass, as strange as waves that bear it,  
In a light as pallid as through water strained.

"Do their alders shimmer green in water's mirror?"  
No, they are reflected more like burning brands!  
(This the Family Journal certainly made clearer)  
For the light is red that streams across the sands.  
Whether Martian nose, by poignant fragrance greeted,  
Sniffs the evening air, the author didn't tell.  
But of such a pleasure surely they are cheated,  
In that heavy atmosphere, where the Martians dwell.

I know not if summer fields are gay with flowers,  
If the verdant spring comes there, as well as here;  
If the lamp of Autumn burns its numbered hours;  
If a whirling snow cloud brings them winter cheer.  
Yes, it seems to me that they must have some pleasure,  
Something gay to smile at during dreary days.  
Very likely, too, of grief they have their measure,  
Weeping o'er small mounds that they, like us, must raise.

"Do they, too, like us, shake hands in friendly greeting?"  
Easy to ask questions, harder to reply!  
Maybe like the glowworms, cautious Martians meeting,  
Wave their small antennae as they're passing by,  
While in vain endeavor Science is devising  
Ways and means to greet them through the atmosphere.  
Let us send our thoughts, a sparkling message rising,  
Signaling a tender friendship from down here.

At this very moment, while the wind is blowing  
In your bonnet's trimming — just this moment now, —  
There may sigh a maid, where Mars' canals are flowing,  
Sigh with love like us, such love as we avow.  
Maybe in queer tones she calls for one she misses;  
Maybe she will get a kiss in evening's dew . . .  
"Do you think that theirs are like our earthly kisses?"  
Possibly that custom's universal too!

# The Dove Queen

Translated by Helen Asbury

See the attendants in crimson attire  
Rush 'round and perspire —  
The moment's at hand!  
Flourishing hammers they tighten the wire  
That glows as a fire  
By lantern-light fanned.  
Gleaming with jewels, the pallid ringmaster  
Stands there uneasy, his whip cracking faster.  
Now he calls "Steady!  
Everyone ready!"  
Quickly the red-clad attendants depart.  
"Ready to start!  
Ready to start!"

Curtains are parting, and into the ring  
Pearl-trimmed Miss Dassy arrives with a spring.  
Daintily dropping a curtsy or two  
She turns then to chalk her shoe.

Charmingly greeting the spectators' rows,  
Hair flying softly, her kisses she throws.  
Loudly the tuba now picks up the beat —  
The tent throbs with melody sweet.

See how the dainty Miss Dassy is swinging —  
The wire is singing —  
It sways with her dance.  
Puts out a foot — an attendant comes springing,  
More chalk he is bringing  
To answer her glance.  
Frida, the beat of the tuba now ceases.  
Look at Miss Dassy — her danger increases!  
Carefully sliding,  
Forward she's gliding —  
As on a sunbeam an angel we'd see.  
Robe flowing free!  
Robe flowing free!

Suddenly opens a bright golden cage.  
Doves fly out languidly over the stage,  
Flapping their wings with a whispering beat,  
But soon want to find a seat.

Dassy reclines as if on her divan  
Resting at ease on the glittering span.  
Doves in her hands and a dove in her hair  
And one at her bosom so fair.

Down on the ground grooms are anxiously quaking  
The platform is shaking —  
They screw it up tight.  
Loud roll of drums the taut silence is breaking —  
My arm Frida's taking  
Quite close in her fright.  
High in the spotlight Miss Dassy aglow  
Waits till the ringmaster signals — "Now — go!"  
Doves round her winging  
Dassy is springing —  
Down to the sawdust she floats through the air!  
Wild flying hair!  
Wild flying hair!

Curtseying, dancing, she skips on her way —  
Catches in passing a whizzing bouquet.  
Din at the circus! A storm of applause!  
The tent fills with loud hurrahs!

Our High Society claps with the crowd;  
Even the Judge almost murmurs aloud.  
Then Hasse Bricklan, the wildest of wights,  
He bellows: "She's splitting her tights!"

Frida, don't wring your small fingers in sadness;  
Don't let all your gladness  
Be turned into gloom!  
Often good breeding too thinly cloaks badness:  
To blame would be madness —  
I'm not saying whom!  
Let us remember this scene then forever — —  
Lovely Miss Dassy, courageous and clever.  
Doves fondly wooing  
Billing and cooing — — —  
Look! In the sawdust a clown does his stunts!  
"Look at me once!  
Look at me once!"

Tenderly waltzing, the tuba now plays;  
Frida sees Doves and their Queen through a haze.  
While the mad clowns in the sawdust perform  
She watches through teardrops warm.  
Red-clad attendants come rushing out fast  
Roll up the big flowered carpet at last.  
Splendidly turns in the flickering light  
The tuba, enormous and bright!

# Frida Cleans House

Translated by Helen Asbury

Something angel-like you may be certain,  
Makes a halo round my Frida's head,  
When behind the Spring's new flowered curtain  
Swift and light I hear her busy tread.  
Never crashing with a din dismaying,  
Soft she goes as rushes' whispered song.  
Yet she does not stand, as is the saying,  
On the social ladder's highest rung.

How she makes a thing of grace and beauty  
Of a task so worldly, I'm afraid  
Science must explain, for that's a duty,  
Loving her so much, I must evade.  
With her brimming pail she kneels to scour;  
Then she dries the prisms round the light.  
Dainty as a butterfly or flower,  
Gentle as the wavelet gleaming bright.

Winter's padding from the windows tearing,  
Breathing on the pane she rubs it clean.  
Quick and strong, her little hands unerring,  
Find again the copper's hidden sheen.  
"Charles XII's Last Journey" next is dusted  
To a lively Boston's gay refrain.  
Happy should the soldiers be, entrusted  
To those hands, where fain they would remain.

While a song the gusty breeze composes  
In the wires strung across the roof,  
On a chest the china cat reposes,  
From the rush and flurry quite aloof.  
Now my angel must a hammer borrow  
While she nails the sampler on the wall:  
"Leave beneath the threshold care and sorrow,  
And your hat and cane out in the hall."

Surely now my loving words have taught her  
That no bitterness my lot may bear;  
Even with the Judge's lovely daughter  
Gentle Frida safely can compare.  
If, in frock-coat hung with decoration,  
He should say "My daughter you may wed,"  
I should run where Frida has her station,



Hunting moths in draperies outspread.  
Though a worldly wind may stir her curtain,  
Worldly dust may gather in her tread,  
Still an angel light, you may be certain,  
Shines about my Frida's lovely head.  
See her like a queen her realm surveying  
Though mid steaming buckets she be found.  
No, she does not stand, as is the saying,  
On the social ladder's highest round.

# The Green-Eyed Monster

Translated by Helen Asbury

"What makes you mutter so madly,  
And sigh all the while so sadly?"

Oh, nothing for a lady to bother her head about!  
She'll find some jollier gentleman to wait on her, no doubt.  
More elegant companions, hereafter!

Haha!

My scorn I show to Frida in laughter.

Haha!

If this would make her happy, quite willingly I'd try it — —  
I'd muddy up the water in our little crystal bay.  
'Twill bubble for a moment, then at last be calm and quiet,  
While rustling reeds the funeral music whisper as they sway.

No billows mark this lonely grave.

A straw hat floats upon the wave.

When time has passed

Beneath a stone is found at last

A note with message fateful:

"For what has been, I'm grateful!"

"You jest too gloomily, mister!  
I'm going to fetch my sister . . . "

Oh no, I am not jesting, I only would tell you this:  
A lady finds consolation in the pressure of a kiss.  
A gentleman will offer it gladly.

Haha!

My scornful laughter rings rather sadly.

Haha!

And while the crowd is searching and shouting on the morrow,  
And frantic boats are churning up the water's surface gray.  
A lady — I shall name no names! — may feel the weight of sorrow.  
But not for long — a gentleman soon comes along the way.

And while my hand, so white, is caught

In rushes' roots — his hand has brought

A bright bouquet. She holds it, rosy red and gay.

Round me, so slowly sinking,

The little fish are blinking.

"I'll stop my ears with my fingers  
As long as your voice still lingers!"

By all means do; but leave just the tiniest space between,  
So she may hear the willows sigh as o'er the grave they lean.  
No "sweetheart" the engraving is naming:

Haha!

"The Glee Club raised this stone", it's proclaiming!

Haha!

And now the grave is quiet, where foliage is gleaming  
And rustling in the autumn wind, when leaves are gold and sere.  
The little bird that lingers on has long been fondly dreaming  
Of flying to a southern land, where waits a sweetheart dear;  
But chirps to me, "I'll stay with thee  
A little while. So bitterly  
You turn to dust!  
To dust, to dust, for love's lost trust . . .  
Let earth's sweet sleep relieve thee.  
No more may sorrow grieve thee!"

"All this because he sweetly  
Helped fasten my cloak more neatly!"

What he has done or may do is not a concern of mine.  
Congratulations I offer for her "Musketeer" so fine!  
I see the bridal veil float about her.

Haha!

With scornful laughter loud, hear me flout her!

Haha!

Don't cry! . . . If to my Frida 'twould give any pleasure  
I'd gladly reach my hand to her to make our peace anew . . .  
Her vase of blue with mignonette I'd fill in heaping measure,  
And list to "Hearts and Flowers" while we walk in evening dew.  
Forget the scenes of dismal death  
I painted in my jealous wrath!  
Those small pearls hide!  
From coffers blue so fast they glide . . .  
And oh, they taste so salt, dear . . .  
'Twas all my foolish fault, dear!

# Little Paree

Translated by Helen Asbury

Frida! "Yes?"  
Frida! "Ah, yes?"  
The town is gay with flags aflutter in the wind's caress.  
Wavelets meet,  
Criss-cross and beat  
On black boats tossing with their lumber cargoes trim and neat.  
The city wrapped in mist we see —  
A pearl within a rose:  
That other Paris it might be,  
The one the Judge well knows!  
Little Paree,  
Little Paree,  
You lie there snug and twinkling in the summer breezes free.

Grim and tall  
Peers over all  
The Poorhouse with the ducks upon the pond within its wall.  
Rosy glow  
The Bank windows show,  
Its awnings wildly flapping as the breezes snatch and blow.  
So calm, without the noise and smoke,  
Today the Mill is mute;  
And quiet verdant bushes cloak  
Our Lecture-Institute.  
Little Paree,  
Little Paree,  
You lie there snug and twinkling in the summer breezes free.

Steamboats glide,  
Puffing with pride;  
The water bubbles in their wake and sprays on either side.  
Dressed in white  
Two come in sight;  
Her parasol is red — the bridge is bathed in golden light.  
A pictured Paris it would seem,  
So calm it is, and still;  
Until we hear, as through a dream,  
The Swedish lark's gay trill.  
Little Paree,  
Little Paree,  
You lie there snug and twinkling in the summer breezes free.

Frida, dear!  
Frida! "I hear!"  
Just think — if all at once the winds of France blew  
round us here!  
Frida lies, Languidly sighs,  
With downy cheek and blood red mouth and evening-colored eyes.  
Within the flowery forest gay  
My loving chatter rings  
So nobly! But I hate to say  
My mind's on baser things!  
Little Paree,  
Little Paree,  
You lie there snug and twinkling in the summer breezes free.

Lucky we!  
Happy and free!  
Our town has not its character, though looking like Paree.  
Fair of form,  
Secure from storm,  
From revolution, tramp of soldiers, frantic crowds a-swarm.  
Not here, amid dread torches' glare,  
The gory headsman comes  
To drag our Judge by hoary hair  
At night, while beat the drums!  
Little Paree,  
Little Paree,  
You lie there snug and twinkling in the summer breezes free.

# The Time When First I Saw You

Translated by Helen Asbury

The time when first I saw you, it was a summer day,  
The morning sun was high in heaven's blue,  
And all the meadow flowers, in colors fresh and gay,  
Stood round and bowed politely two by two.  
So soft the wind was whispering, and down upon the strand, dear,  
The rippling wave crept fondly toward the shells along the sand, dear,  
The time when first I saw you, it was a summer day,  
The first time that I took you by the hand, dear.

The time when first I saw you, bright shone the summer sky,  
As dazzling as the swan in white array.  
There came from out the woodland a sudden joyful cry,  
Where forest fringe was green against the day.  
'Twas like a song from Paradise, and there above us winging,  
Far, far away and hard to see, the little lark was singing.  
The time when first I saw you, bright shone the summer sky,  
Its gentle warmth and light about us flinging.

And now whene'er I see you, though winter wind be chill,  
When snow lies deep, all glitt'ring white and cold,  
I hear the summer breezes, the lark above the hill,  
While plashing wavelets murmur as of old.  
I think I see the grasses green, and smell the fragrant flowers,  
The clover, too, that charmed us, and the summer-scented bowers.  
That summer sun is beaming in your bright features still,  
And glows for me through winter's longest hours.

# Spanish Moonlight

Translated by Charles Wharton Stork

Sometimes my thoughts in fervor teeming  
Fly to Granada's courts with moonlight streaming.  
Our homely cottage fades then to my seeming  
With thatch of turf beside the lake so blue.  
'Tis just the night this mood to flatter:  
A pair of castanets I'll clatter  
And round me in the dance I'll scatter  
The strange mad songs that thrill my bosom through.

The village from my sight has faded,  
The mayor's domain where poplars stand paraded,  
Our lawn as well with lindens shaded  
And Swedish lilacs in their dim festoons.  
"Caramba!" Hand to hip I'm prancing,  
As like a twisted snake advancing  
I swing about in desperate dancing  
My legs that strain their braided pantaloons.

About my lips the songs are playing  
Like waters from the lion fountain spraying  
As far from home in fancy straying  
I rage, I reel in wild oblivious mood.  
A Spanish maid with eyes a-glister  
To mad guitar notes is my sister.  
A thousand times methinks I 've kissed her —  
So full of ardor is the southern blood!

No more by neighbors here surrounded,  
"Caramba!" now I cry. How fine it sounded!  
But suddenly I stand dumbfounded —  
'Mid dusky orbs I meet a glance of blue.  
The gusts of passion pass from o'er me.  
Methought that Frida stood before me  
With eyes reproachful to implore me:  
"Such violent courses are not good for you."

Collapsed the castles of my dreaming  
And quenched the glories from Granada streaming.  
I see again our cottage gleaming;  
Primrose and corn-flower meadows bloom below.  
We roam through fields as fresh as Eden's.  
Oh, never let the thought find credence  
Another moon is fair as Sweden's,  
Though Spanish moonlight more intensely glow!



# The Coming of Ghostly Death

Translated by C. D. Locock

So the hour is now past,  
And thou comest at last,  
While my doorway with pine-twigs they strew,  
And my curtains of green  
Floral-pattern sateen,  
Sewn close lest the daylight come through;  
And my fingers are clasping a rose  
(Though for scents I've no sense in my nose): —  
Yea, the hour is now past,  
And thou comest at last,  
While I hide here so shyly from view.

Starched folds everywhere —  
So icy their glare;  
The candlesticks (hired for the day)  
Shed the feeblest of light  
On a fringe like the night,  
The blackest from over the way.  
And a gleam of white faces in tears  
Like mist-hidden roses appears: —  
Starched folds everywhere —  
So icy their glare,  
When the Scythe-bearer comes for his prey.

To the bells' clanging din  
The tureen is brought in,  
On a cloth starched to azure — so clean !  
On the water-jug's glass  
Through the curtains may pass  
From the pale sun a gold-yellow sheen.  
Dress-coats round "the relics" appear,  
And a moth-paper scent fills the air: —  
To the bells' clanging din  
The tureen is brought in,  
Glazed stoneware in flowers and green.

Soon chilled lies the room,  
Mid the trestle's draped gloom,  
Chilled, draughty and wretchedly bare;  
And a leaf, gone astray  
From some wreath, blows away  
Through the window now wide to the air.  
Heavy footsteps are heard in the snow,  
While the bells toll dreary and slow: —  
Now chilled lies the room,  
Mid the trestle's draped gloom  
And the bier-cloth that hangs on a chair.

Too much bother indeed —  
There's so little I need!  
Far better, far simpler, to fall  
Like a leaf to the ground  
That goes eddying round  
Till it rests in the dust by the wall:  
Where the rains and the frosts turn it white,  
Till it crumbles to fragments one night: —  
Too much bother indeed —  
So little I need  
Of their ringing and singing and all!

Nay, but if you can spare  
Just a rose, put it there  
On my grave where the green grasses grow:  
When the song of the bird  
In the woodland is heard  
Mid the warmth of the glad summer's glow  
Then, if vanishing fingers can blow  
You a kiss — they will do it, I know!  
As a butterfly sips  
It shall light on your lips,  
Mid the crosses and white shells below.

# The Dying Tone

(Spoken by a café melody)

Translated by C. D. Locock

I was born beneath the bow — and forth I went  
Into the chilly halls, to tremble there . . .  
I thank whatever souls their shelter lent  
Their warmth of love to this poor wanderer.

Brief is my life — yet shall I always see,  
Though dead, the one that took me, smiling-eyed,  
And one, more sorrowful, who seized on me  
And pressed me to her breast before I died.

From these I pass into the silent land.  
O nothingness! but though so swift I wing,  
Had I not found some one to understand? —  
Ping . . . I am going . . . Ping . . . Kling . . .

# Frida's Spring-Cleaning

Translated by C. D. Locock

Surely something angel-like is glowing  
Round my Frida's head, you must admit!  
Where Spring's curtains in the breeze are blowing,  
Mark the twinkling of her tiny feet.  
Noise nor din attends not her progression,  
No more sound than wind among the sedge;  
Yet she has no place — how goes the expression? —  
On the social ladder's topmost ledge.

How she lends to such an operation,  
Dull and homely, that celestial tone,  
Science may devise some explanation,  
I, who love her, cannot think of one.  
See how busily she scrubs and scours,  
Dries the crystals of the chandelier,  
Yet preserves her sheen of summer flowers,  
Gleam of wave that glitters on the mere.

Winter's wadding, off she clears, and gladly,  
Sees the window-pane made clean at last.  
Now the copper vase — which wants it badly —  
Gets a rub from fingers flying fast.  
"Charles the Twelfth's Last Journey," just above it,  
Next she cleans, humming a "Boston" air;  
How the blue-clad bodyguard would love it,  
Felt they the soft touch of hands so fair!

While the merry gusts of Spring are raising  
Music, and the roof-wires ring and clash,  
On its shelf the china cat sits gazing  
Thoughtfully on Frida's splash and dash.  
Soon the nimble fingers take a fresh hold,  
Nail those famed devices to the wall:  
"Leave your tragic thoughts beneath the threshold,"  
"Hang your hats and jackets in the hall!"

Bitter thoughts of Fate's unkind variety  
Vex not at all the faithful lover's voice;  
Had I leave to choose from our society  
The cream of all — still Frida were my choice!  
Quoth the Mayor himself, in all his glory,  
"Take my Astraea, pearl beyond compare,"  
Frida I'd fly to in her upper story,  
Hunting moth behind her curtains there.

Homely the breezes through her casement streaming  
Homely the dust about her flying feet;  
Still there is something angel-like that's beaming  
Round my Frida's head, you must admit.  
Queenly she stands, her face irradiated  
With steam of pails and buckets, gleaming bright;  
Yet has no place — as I've already stated —  
On the social ladder's topmost height.

# Birger Sjöberg

born Dec. 6, 1885 in Vänersborg

died April 30, 1929 in Växjö

Birger Sjöberg was a Swedish songwriter and poet known for his development of a strikingly original form in modern Swedish poetry.

After very little formal education and a number of occupations, Sjöberg became a journalist. In his spare time he wrote the lyrics and music of songs, which he sang occasionally to entertain friends. His first publication of songs, *Fridas bok* (1922; "Frida's Book"), was highly successful and brought him much acclaim. He was hailed a modern troubadour in the tradition of Sweden's Carl Bellman, and he soon found himself on a series of concert tours with his songs. He recoiled from this attention, however, and withdrew in disgust, apparently desiring his reputation to be based on work more significant than his songs. His only novel, *Kvartetten som sprängdes* (1924; "The Quartet Which Was Broken Up"), also became highly popular. He unleashed his full fury in *Kriser och Kransar* (1926; "Crises and Laurel Wreaths"), a relentless and explosive confrontation with post-World War I life and an artistic breakthrough to new forms and highly modern poetic devices.

After his death, two further volumes of Sjöberg's work appeared, a second series of Frida songs (1929) and a selection from some 3,000 poems and fragments published under the title *Minnen från jorden* (1940; "Memories from Earth").

— Encyclopædia Britannica

## Birger Sjöberg

With Birger Sjöberg ballad writing and modernist, avant-garde poetry stand side by side. His *Fridas bok* (Frida's Book), 1922, consists of the poetically ethereal and clever pastiche-like songs purportedly penned by a naively idealistic shop clerk in an idyllic small town. The Frida songs can be said to be a twentieth-century counterpart to Bellman's poetry, and through the years they have retained a popularity which can be closely compared with that of the eighteenth-century poet. The charm of the Frida songs lies above all in the contrasts between the poetic shop clerk's comical seriousness, the mundaneness in his environment and the down-to-earth objectivity of his muse, Frida. But the depiction is tenderly understanding and sympathetic, and the comedy in the songs lies to a high degree in the parodic language. The songs and post-Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century can be discerned behind these subtle and yet moving pastiches, while there are echoes of Fredman's epistles in the following small-town vignette:

*Allvarsam  
blickar där fram  
vår kommimala Fattigård med ankor på sin damm.  
Rosigt ljus  
pa. Sparbankens hus;  
markiser fladdra vilt och skönt vid blåstars ryck och sus.  
Så lugn, förutan rök och tjut,  
Fabriken sova får.  
Vårt Föreläsningsinstitut  
bak gröna buskar står.  
Lilla Paris,  
Lilla Paris,  
du ligger trygg och tindrande i sommarns friska bns.*

Seriously  
peeps out there  
our communal Workhouse with ducks on its pond.  
Rosy light  
at the Savings Bank building;  
sun blinds flutter wildly and beautifully at the pull and sigh  
of the wind.  
So calm, without smoke and howling,  
The factory may sleep.  
Our Lecture Institute  
behind green bushes stands.  
Little Paris,  
Little Paris,  
you lie secure and sparkling in the summer's fresh breeze.

Sjöberg set his poems to music himself and performed them on long tours around the country that made him inordinately popular. When he later tried more difficult poetic forms, his reaction to the curse of popularity played a central role.

— Ingemar Algulin