

# A VISIT TO ITHACA

*The Land Where Homer Lives Again*

By Franz Spunda

Translated from the *Neue Freie Presse*, Viennese Daily

**L**EUKAS is like the Iliad; Ithaca like the Odyssey. Leukas is full of sharp, mountainous ridges, while here in Ithaca the lovely hills and silvery bays are gently rounded, for all their classic strength. Seen from a distance, this island of curving bays that glow red in the sunshine looks no different from any other southern island, but its immortal name sets it apart from all the rest. As our ship comes closer, the country stands out more clearly, sweet perfumes overwhelm us, and, as we lazily drift into the wide harbor, the struggles of daily life are forgotten and all its corruptions seem left behind. An arrival in Ithaca is like a return to our youth, to the time when we used to play at being Greeks and Trojans, when one of us took the part of Hector and another the part of Ulysses.

The town of Ithaca, which up till lately has been known as Vathy, is set on the bay that Homer referred to as Phorkios. It is a collection of brightly painted houses with gardens and hedges growing obligingly between each little domain. Everything is up to date and no antique relics can be found. In another respect Homer's description does not coincide with reality, for the grotto of the nymphs in which Odysseus stowed away the gifts of the Phæacians is lacking. The visitor who wants

to find this Homeric site must travel southward for an hour and he will discover a cave that opens into the bottom of a hill known as Hagios Georgios.

But it is much more pleasant to range through the outlying districts of the little town. A well-paved road leads westward to the bay through gardens and olive groves. The higher I climb, the more beautiful the view becomes. Above me a windmill is grinding and a miller's donkey is bearing away dusty sacks of meal. In this part of the world pigs are fattened on bran, a load of which is being carried on the back of an inquisitive billy goat, accompanied by the screaming children of the miller. The sails of the mill are patched with bright colors and they flap in the air like the wings of a dragon, while the millstone creaks and groans. Beside the road, lofty locust trees surround the remains of the Venetian castle which used to dominate the entrance to the harbor. Locust buds are ankle deep on the ground and a heavy, sweet smell arises from them. Bright red insects are buzzing in the tumble-down houses.

**I**N FRONT of me, to the north, rises the massive island that Homer called Neritas and that is now known as Anogt. The air is heavy with an approaching storm and the sails of the near-by windmill whirl around like giddy bats. Gusts of wind whistle through the ancient trees and remains of locust buds descend about me. The miller unfastens the sails of his windmill from the poles and shouts to me, 'A storm is coming.'

His invitation is welcome and I enter his house and sit down on a bench. His family has its hands full trying to chase a swarm of squealing pigs into their sty. At least a dozen young pigs rush wildly into the room where we are sitting and leap on top of the bed and over the chairs. Lightning is already flashing and the room quakes from the effects of the storm. Suddenly the miller rushes through the room. 'A pig has escaped,' he shouts and darts away grumbling. An oil lamp is lit in front of the icon in the corner to protect the house from bolts of lightning. I discover that my host knows little of Homer or the *Odyssey*. 'That is only for lazy people. If a man has six children to look out for, he has not much time for anything else. When I have time to read, I borrow books from the schoolmaster.' I ask him what his favorite books are. '*The Count of Monte Christo* and *The Jew of Paris*.' He does not understand everything in them, but they are exciting and he enjoys them. Meanwhile, his children are making so much noise chasing the little pigs that I can hardly hear him.

The storm finally passes and the air grows cooler, and I set forth on my return to the town as evening descends, with slate-gray clouds above me. In the hotel great doings are afoot. A music teacher who is spending the summer here has set up a school and naturally I must hear his pupils

perform. Some fifty people are in the room and a girl is singing Schubert's 'Winterreise.' An amateur orchestra plays one of Rossini's overtures. It is not the first time that I observe how unmusical the Greeks are. The only time that divine fire seems to consume them is when they sing monotonous dirges, which are more Slavic than Greek. Such outbursts sound like a kind of protest against their destiny, a lament for all that they have lost and for the fact that they are quite alone, shut off from the culture of Western Europe. It is the complaint of a nation that has brought forth a Homer and a Plato, but that now reads Dumas and plays Rossini without even being able to understand them. It is the lament of a lost soul that cannot find its way back to the true Ithaca. Never have I been so vividly aware of the tragedy of modern Greece.

**T**HE next morning my landlord gives me a guide, for it is not safe to wander alone through the island on account of the lack of water. The goal of all visitors to Ithaca is the site of the Homeric town in the northern part of the isle near the village of Stavros. As on all the Ionic islands, the roads here have been excellent ever since the English took control, but there are only two automobiles. The landlord rented the smaller of these two machines and I set forth early the next morning with Gerasimos, my guide. We went past the old mill, where the miller winked at me in a friendly fashion, and made our way on past the bay of Dexia.

Stavros has a new, clean hotel owned by an Austrian lady who bought it last autumn. 'Do many foreigners come here?' I ask her.

'Not many,' she replies. 'Only people who are really interested in Ithaca and in Homer. Archæologists from all over the world come here, but they all speak terrible Greek. Naturally they know nothing of modern Greek pronunciation.'

Later in the day my guide and I go for a walk and find ourselves standing in the shadow of an ivy-covered cliff. 'That is the Melanhydros (black water) Spring, the well that served the whole village in Homer's time,' he tells me. It is a deep gully of roughly hewn stone. The water pours into a bucket and is lukewarm and smells of ochre. Could this little stream have served a whole village, or does the spring flow less freely now that there are fewer trees on the island?

I walk on some paces further alone and come upon the 'School of Homer.' A broad terrace rises like a pinnacle into the blue sky. From here one can see all the way to rocky Leukas, which glows like red-hot iron. The whole scene is as fresh as it must look to the eye of a forest deer. Forget Homer. There is something even greater than Homer here. The whole world seems to be singing as it must have sung before man was created, a simple island song in which the melody of sea and earth is blended.

I am in Elysian solitude, but, as my gaze wanders into the tangle of long willow branches, it is suddenly arrested by a little shape in the thicket. Gerasimos is waiting there to show me the Homeric relics. The sanctuary, consecrated to the great Athanasios, is made of enormous rough stone blocks. The masonry is the same as in Mycenæ, except that it is fresher, and more bright.

An ancient path of hewn stone leads from the sanctuary down to a lower terrace, whose smooth walls and niches clearly indicate that it was the centre of some ancient cult. Enormous rocks support the roof of this second sanctuary.

'Homer!' I cry the name aloud, for it is indeed he, more alive than in his words, which sing the same song that the trees and the sea sing.

**S**UNLIT silence surrounds me. Gerasimos is sleeping and I, too, sink to the ground. Beneath me a heart like my own is beating, the heart of the island which existed before man was created and which will outlive us all. The air sizzles and a heavy, oppressive heat arises from the broom and brambles.

My companion wakes and complains of hunger. He then shows me a few grave stones overgrown with vegetation and a dried-up spring which perhaps was also a grave and not a spring at all, for it is shaped like a beehive, as the graves in Mycenæ are. Possibly at some later date it was changed into a spring, as if death had suddenly come to life in it.

Gerasimos now leads me across a meadow where young goats are grazing to a farmhouse where relations of his dwell. He explains to me that Penelope's house stood here. Three different harbors are visible from this spot: those of Polis and Phrikes, and, to the north, the Bay of Aphales, which corresponds to Homer's Bay of Rheiton. On one side of this bay rises the little wind-swept village of Exogi, planted about with tall cypresses. Penelope's successor serves us coffee, but, since she has no food to offer, we must return to Stavros, where we are long overdue at our hotel. The local schoolmaster greets me cordially.

During my meal I describe Corfu. 'Is it true,' I am asked, 'that the Achilleion is being changed into a gambling casino? If such a casino is being built, will it attract foreigners to the island of Ithaca, and if they come here can we look forward to seeing a big modern hotel built in Stavros?'

'God forbid!' I reply. 'Many people, of course, would come here, but the charm of the island would inevitably suffer.'

In the afternoon I wander through the holy groves without a guide. The views become more and more beautiful as the sunlight keeps changing in color and intensity. No actual Homer relics are to be seen, yet the spirit of Homer lives in every breath of wind, every stone, and every tree.

Anyone who comes to Ithaca in search of Homeric remains on the scale of those to be seen in Mycenæ or in Leukas will be disappointed. Yet there are big structures here that date back to the period when the Cyclopean walls of Argolis were built. On Mount Ætos lie gigantic ruins known as the *Kastro tu Odysseos*, the castle of Odysseus. A century ago archaeologists believed this was Homer's city, but competent experts now recognize in these remains the ancient fortress of Alalcomenæ, which dates back only to the sixth century. Yet the atmosphere of Homer pervades everything and is well worth breathing.

**T**HOUGH the southern part of the island contains no relics of ancient times, anyone who enjoys Homeric landscapes will find his loveliest dreams come true. Every year hundreds of Homer enthusiasts come to Stavros in the north, but few of them venture south. For that reason, Gerasimos does not find it hard to persuade me to go. Providing ourselves with food and bulky water flasks, we set out on a lovely stretch of road. Soon, however, this thoroughfare is lost in a mass of underbrush and presently we are met by a sharp smell of burning brush. Clouds of smoke envelop us and flames are licking up the mountain side.

'The brush is burning; the Zupani have done it,' says my companion, as we discern a number of half-naked peasants waving firebrands. They are Slavic servants of some Greek employer, and, in order to have good grazing land in the spring, they singe the dry meadow during the summer. This is against the law, but there is no way of preventing it. A sudden gust of wind blows the smoke our way and our eyes smart and the tears stream from them. When we are again able to see, we imagine that we are beholding a mirage. A bay of bright green lies before us, extending far into the distance. Its entrance is guarded by a little island overgrown with green olive trees. Beyond it in the silvery sea innumerable other islands are set like floating, phantom clouds.

A steep path leads us to a point high above the sea. Overhead are steep cliffs of limestone with occasional crevasses in them. Suddenly we notice a white block of stone jutting out from the rest and my guide shouts, 'That is Korax, the place of execution.' It is over three hundred feet high and as sheer as if it had been cut with a knife. Above is a stratum of ochre-colored rock that loses itself finally in a mass of boulders overgrown with lichen. The air is moist here with the smell of muddy water. Early in the year a cataract flows down this watershed, but now there is not a drop to be seen. Where is the Homeric spring that once was here? A cistern is all that remains, and a peasant is sitting over it, patching his shoe. As he sees us coming, he walks forward to meet us and cries out to my guide, 'Is he English? Has he any money?' I reply with a laugh that I must answer no to both questions, but that he can have some cigarettes.

FIRST of all, we refresh ourselves with water which does not taste as if it came from any Homeric spring. It has an ochre flavor and is rather sour and lukewarm. The peasant pays but slight attention to his herd as he asks me what I think the prospects for tourist travel are. He knows that foreigners demand that he strike a Homeric pose and he is clever enough to stand for hours by this dirty pool because Homer once mentioned it. 'Everything is not in books, yet people believe that they are God-knows-how educated because they have read books. But what has all this got to do with Homer?'

He is right. He has no need of Homer, for whoever lives like Homer feels that this condition of life is as natural to him as our modern needs are to us. Poetry is always an overflow of some higher emotion. For us it is this emotion of Homer's, and for the shepherd perhaps it is a factory. Our yearning for naïveté is an acknowledgment of our guilt: we have had too much to do with machines. We should like to be shepherds again, tending flocks, yet we cannot. That is why Greece is a sort of lost Paradise—that is why its landscape fills us with sorrow.

The herd of goats approaches with its bells tinkling. At its head is a dirty billy goat with an evil gleam in his eye, like Satan come to life. One whistle from the shepherd and the whole herd rushes out of the bushes from every side. In the twinkling of an eye they have gathered at the cistern and the shepherd throws a few handfuls of salt in it while the animals drink as if they would never be satisfied. The shepherd cuts two long sticks and gives me one and the guide the other. 'Help me drive home the herd.' Is he trying to make us play at being Homeric shepherds, or is it real? Anyway, I enjoy it. I walk slightly behind while the other two walk ahead to my right and left. Any goat that refuses to go receives a blow, but it has to be cleverly administered. Too weak a blow makes no effect, and, if you hit a goat too hard, he gives a great leap and the others follow suit.

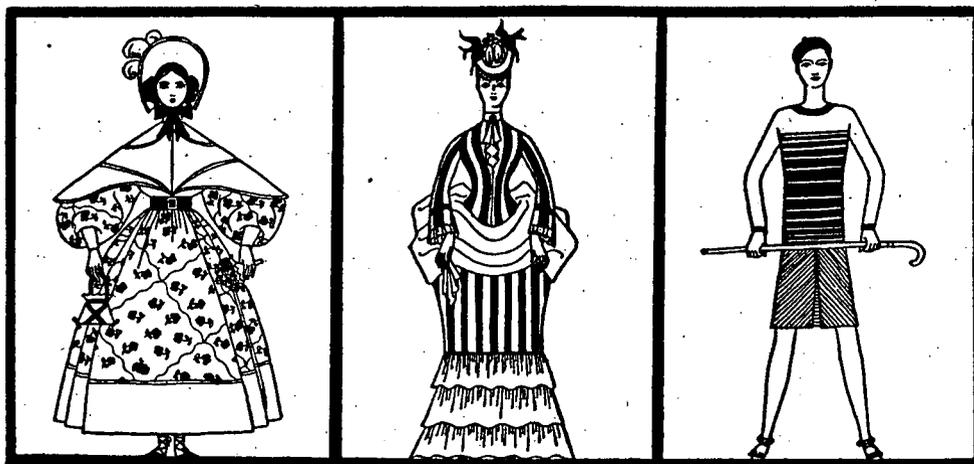
When we come to the burning meadow, the goats stop. We make our way around it through a piece of low ground that has already been burned, and presently arrive at the fold. Only the she-goats are driven in; the males remain outside. Our shepherd milks one of the females and we drink the lavender-tasting milk and munch the bread that he gives us. He then takes us into his little hut, where he shows me a number of postcards from Manchester, Brighton, and Copenhagen. They are cards that visitors have sent him, visitors who remember him when they return home. His latest card, which came from Cleveland, I translate for him, and he is obviously pleased that someone in America thought of him.

The sun is sinking and the little goats are cuddling up to their mothers and going to sleep. The males are lazily sharpening their horns on the bars of the fold. As we make our way home through the twilight,

we pass the encampment of the Zupani, who look scarcely human in their dirty sheepskin garments. They are Montenegrins and smoke little clay pipes.

Below us the lights of the town are glittering. In front of a house, two girls sit singing the sad song of Dimitri, a soldier who died in Asia Minor. Their voices are faint and tremulous, but their song contains everything from Homer until to-day. And the memory of it brings all of Ithaca back to me again, a lost and lazy Paradise, an island of eternal homesickness.





# FEMININE TWILIGHT

*A Frenchman Discusses the Modern Woman*

By Edmond Jaloux

Translated from *Le Temps*, Paris Daily

**A**T THE SEASHORE and in the mountains, on trains and in Paris, one is struck by the tendency of modern women to deviate from the standard recognized as feminine for centuries and to grow more virile instead. We men did not demand such homage, but we are flattered, none the less. Ever since the close of the pagan period we have become accustomed to passing as the ugly sex, whose rôle was to address adulations to our ladies. Hence the great surprise and slightly tickled vanity that agitates us to-day. The *nouveau riche* is a familiar figure, but since the War we men have become the *nouveaux beaux*. There is something mildly intoxicating about it.

This resemblance between men and women is obviously more evident during summer, for in winter the cold weather forces women to preserve a certain amount of feminine coquetry. But, alas, it seems that furs are to be the only connecting link between the woman of yesterday and the woman of to-day. For not only have bobbed hair, short skirts, skill at games, and a passion for smoking transformed our lady friends; but a whole body of customs, ideas, and manners is creating a deep fissure between the past and the present.

Obviously, the romantic lady of the 1830's, who had the vapors, who fainted at the mention of certain words, and who mixed God with her