

Oktoberfest

THOMAS WOLFE



ONE Sunday afternoon, at the end of September, I made my way, accompanied by Heinrich Bahr, to the Theresien Fields, on the eastern edges of Munich, where the October fair was going on. As we walked along past the railway station and towards the carnival grounds, the streets, and all the streets that led to it, began to swarm with people. Most of them were native Münchenerers, but a great number were also Bavarian country people. These Bavarians were brawny men and women who stained the crowd brilliantly with the rich dyes of their costume—the men in their elaborately embroidered holiday shorts and stockings, the women in their bright dresses and lace bodices, marching briskly along with the springy step of the mountaineer. These peasants had the perfect flesh and the sound teeth of animals. Their smooth round faces wore only the markings of the sun and the wind: they were unworn by the thought and pain that waste away man's strength. I looked at them with a pang of regret and envy—their lives were so strong and so confident, and having missed so much they seemed to have gained so greatly. Their lives were limited to one or two desires—most of them had never read a book, a visit to this magic city of Munich was to them a visit to the heart of the universe, and the world that existed beyond their mountains had no real existence for them at all.

As we neared the Theresien Fields, the crowd became so thick that movement was impeded and slowed down. The huge noises of the fair came to us now, and I could see the various buildings. My first feeling as I entered the Fields was one of overwhelming disappointment. What lay before me and around me only seemed to be a smaller and less brilliant Coney Island. There were dozens of booths and sheds filled with cheap dolls, teddy bears, candy wrappers, clay targets, etc., with all the accompanying claptrap of two-headed monsters, crazy houses, fat ladies, dwarfs, palmists, hypnotists, as well as all the elaborate machinery for making one dizzy: whirling carriages and toy automobiles that spun about on an electrified floor, all filled with people who screamed with joy when the crazy vehicles crashed together and were released again by the attendant.

Heinrich Bahr began to laugh and stare like a child.

The childlike capacity of all these people for amusement was astonishing. Like children, they seemed never to grow weary of the whole gaudy show. Great fat fellows with shaven heads and creased necks rode on the whirling and whipping machines, or rode round and round, again and again, on the heaving wooden horses of the merry-go-rounds. Heinrich was fascinated: I rode with him several times on the breathless dip-and-dive of the great wooden trestlelike railway, and then was whipped and spun dizzy in several of the machines.

Finally Heinrich was content. We moved slowly along down the thronging central passage of the fair until we came to a more open space at the edge of the Fields. Here from a little platform a man was haranguing the crowd in harsh, carnival-barker's German. Beside him on the platform stood a young man whose body and arms were imprisoned in a sleeveless canvas jacket and manacled with a chain. Presently the barker stopped talking, the young man thrust his feet through canvas loops, and he was hauled aloft, feet first, until he hung face downward above the staring mob. I watched him as he began his desperate efforts to free himself from the chain and jacket that fettered him, until I saw his face turn purple, and the great veins stand out in ropes upon his forehead. Meanwhile a woman passed through the crowd soliciting contributions, and when she had got all the money that the crowd would yield, the young man, whose swollen face was now almost black with blood, freed himself very quickly and was lowered to the earth. The crowd dispersed almost, it seemed to me, with a kind of sullenness as if the thing which they had waited to see had now happened but had somehow disappointed them, and while the barker began his harangue again, the young man sat in a chair recovering himself, with his hand before his eyes. Meanwhile the woman who had collected money stood by him anxiously, looking at him, and in a moment spoke to him. And somehow just by their nearness to each other and by no other outward sign there was communicated to me a sense of tenderness and love.

My mind was reeling from all the clamorous confusion of the fair and this last exhibition, coming as a climax to an unceasing program of monsters and animal sensations, touched me with a sense of horror. For a moment it seemed to me that there was something evil and innate in men that blackened and tainted even their most primitive pleasures.

Late afternoon had come; the days now were shortening rapidly, and the air was already that of autumn—it

was crisp and chill, meagerly warmed by a thin red sunshine. Over all the fair there rose the dense and solid fabric of a hundred thousand voices. Heinrich, whose interest in the shows of the fair had been for the time appeased, now began to think of beer. Taking me by the arm, he joined in the vast oscillation of the crowd that jammed the main avenue of the carnival in an almost solid wedge.

The Germans moved along slowly and patiently, with that tremendous massivity that seems to be an essence of their lives, accepting the movement of the crowd with enormous contentment as they lost themselves and became a part of the great beast around them. Their heavy bodies jostled and bumped against one another awkwardly and roughly, but there was no anger among them. They roared out greetings or witticisms to one another and to everyone; they moved along in groups of six or eight, men and women all together with arms linked.

Heinrich Bahr had become eager and gay; he laughed and chuckled to himself constantly; presently, slipping his hand through my arm with a friendly and persuasive movement, he said: "Come! Let us go and see the Roasted Ox." And immediately at these words an enormous hunger woke in me, a hunger for flesh such as I had never known: I wanted not only to see the Roasted Ox, I wanted to devour great pieces of it. I had already noticed one characteristic of this fair that distinguished it from any other I had ever seen. This was the great number of booths, large and small, given over to the sale of hot and cold meats. Great sausages hung in ropes and festoons from the walls of some of these places, while in others there was a constant exhalation from steaming and roasting viands of all kinds and sizes. The fragrance and the odor were maddening. And it seemed to me that above this dense mass of people that swayed along so slowly, there hovered forever in the thin cold air an odor of slaughtered flesh.

But now we found ourselves before a vast long shed, gaily colored in front, and bearing above its doors a huge drawing of an ox. This was the Oxen Roastery (Ochsen-Braterei), but so dense was the crowd within that a man stood before the doors with his arms out, keeping back the people who wanted to enter, and telling them they must wait another fifteen minutes. Heinrich and I joined the crowd and waited docilely with all the others: to me there was communicated some of the enormous patience of this crowd, which waited and which did not try to thrust past barriers. Presently the doors were opened and we all went in.

I found myself in a vast long shed at the end of which, through the dense

cloud of tobacco smoke which thickened the atmosphere almost to the consistency of a London fog, I could see the carcasses of two great animals revolving slowly on iron spits over troughs of red-hot coals.

The place, after the chill bite of the October air, was warm—warm with a single unmistakable warmth: the warmth of thousands of bodies crowded together in an enclosed place. And mingled with this warmth, there was an overpowering odor of food. At hundreds of tables people were sitting together devouring tons of flesh—ox flesh, great platters full of sliced cold sausages, huge slabs of veal and pork, together with the great stone mugs that foamed with over a liter of the cold and strong October beer. There was a heavy and incessant rumble of voices full of food, that rose and fell in brittle waves. Down the central aisles and around the sides, moved and jostled constantly another crowd looking restlessly over the densely packed area for a vacant place. And the brawny peasant women who acted as waitresses plunged recklessly through this crowd, bearing platters of food or a half-dozen steins of beer in one hand, and brusquely thrusting human impediments out of their way with another.

Heinrich and I moved with the crowd slowly down the central aisle. The feeders, it seemed to me, were for the most part great heavy people who already had in their faces something of the bloated contentment of swine. Their eyes were dull and bleared with food and beer, and many of them stared at the people around them in a kind of stupefaction, as if they had been drugged. And indeed the air itself, which was so thick and strong it could be cut with a knife, was sufficient to drug one's senses, and I was therefore glad when, having arrived at the end of the aisle and stared for a moment at the great carcass of the ox that was turning brown as it revolved slowly before us, Heinrich suggested that we go elsewhere.

The sharp air lifted me at once from lethargy, and I began to look about me quickly and eagerly again. The crowd was growing denser as evening approached, and I knew now that the evening was to be dedicated solidly to food and beer.

Distributed among the innumerable smaller buildings of the fair, like lions couched among a rabble of smaller beasts, there rose about us the great beer halls erected by the famous breweries. And as thick as the crowd had been before the booths and shows, it seemed small compared to the crowd that filled these vast buildings—enormous sheds that each held several thousand people. Before us now and from a distance, I could see the great





red façade of the Löwenbrau brewery, with its proud crest of two royal lions, rampant. But when we came near the vast roaring of sound the hall enclosed, we saw that it would be impossible to find a seat there. Thousands of people were roaring over their beer at the tables, and hundreds more milled up and down incessantly, looking for an opening.

We tried several other of the great beer halls of the breweries with no better success, but at length we found one which had a few tables set about on a small graveled space before the hall, screened from the swarming crowd outside by a hedge. A few people were sitting at some of the tables, but most of the tables were vacant: darkness was now approaching, the air was sharp and frosty, and there was almost a frantic eagerness to join the fetid human warmth, enter the howling tempest of noise and drunkenness that the great hall contained. But both of us were now tired, fatigued by the excitement, by the crowd, by the huge kaleidoscope of noise, of color and sensation we had experienced. "Let us sit down here," I said, indicating one of the vacant tables before the hall. And Heinrich, after peering restlessly through one of the windows at the smoky chaos within, through which dark figures pushed and jostled like spirits lost in the foggy vapors of Valhalla, consented and took a seat, but with a disappointment he was unable to conceal.

"It is beautiful in there," he said. "You cannot afford to miss it." Then a peasant woman bore down upon us, swinging in each of her strong hands six foaming steins of the powerful October beer. She smiled at us with a ready friendliness and said, "The light or the dark?" We answered, "Dark." Almost before we had spoken she had set two foaming mugs before us on the table and was on her way again.

"But beer?" I said. "Why beer? Why have they come here to drink beer? Why have all these great sheds been built here by the famous breweries when all Munich is renowned for beer and there are hundreds of beer restaurants in the city?"

"Yes," Heinrich answered. "But—" he smiled and emphasized the word, "this is October beer. It is almost twice as strong as ordinary beer."

Then we seized our great stone mugs, clinked them together with a smiling "Prosit," and in the frosty sharp exhilaration of that air we drank long and deep the strong cold liquor that sent tingling through our veins its potent energy. All about us people were eating and drinking—near by at another table some peasant people in gay clothes had ordered beer and now, unwrapping several paper bundles that they were carrying with them, they set out on the table a prodigious quantity of food and began to eat and drink stolidly. The man, a brawny fellow with thick mustaches and white woolen stockings that covered his powerful calves but left his feet and knees bare, pulled from his pocket a large knife and cut the heads from several salt fish, which shone a beautiful golden color in the evening light. From another paper the woman produced several rolls, a bunch of radishes, and a big piece of liver sausage and added them to the general board. Two children, a boy and a girl, the girl with braided hanks of long blond hair falling before her over the shoulders, both watchful and blue-eyed with the intent and focused hunger of animals, stared silently at the food as their parents cut it and apportioned it. In a moment, with this same silent and voracious attentiveness, all of them were eating and drinking.

Everyone was eating; everyone was drinking. A ravenous hunger—an insane hunger that knew no appeasement, that wished to glut itself on all the roasted ox flesh, all the sausages, all the salt fish in the world, seized me and held me in its teeth. In all the world there was nothing but Food—glorious Food. And beer—October beer. The world was one enormous Belly—there was no higher heaven than the paradise of Cram and Gorge. All of the agony of the mind was here forgotten. What did these people know about books? What did they know about pictures? What did they know about the million tumults of the soul, the conflict and the agony of the spirit, the hopes, fears, hatreds, failures, and ambitions, the whole fevered complex of modern life? These people lived for nothing but to eat and drink—and they were right.

The doors of the great hall kept opening and shutting constantly as the incessant stream of beer drinkers pressed patiently in. And from within I heard the shattering blare

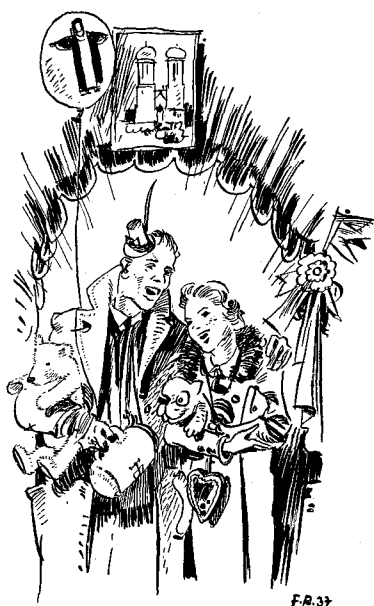
of a huge brass band and the roar of five thousand beer-drunk voices, rocking together in the rhythms of "Trink, Trink, Brüderlein, Trink!"

Our savage hunger was devouring us: we called out loudly to the bustling waitress as she passed us and were told that if we wanted hot food we must go within. But in a moment she sent another woman to our table who was carrying an enormous basket loaded with various cold foods. I took two sandwiches, made most deliciously of onions and small salted fish, and an enormous slice of liver cheese, with a crust about its edges. Heinrich also selected two or three sandwiches, and, having ordered another liter of dark beer apiece, we began to devour our food. Darkness had come on: all of the buildings and amusement devices of the fair were now blazing with a million lights; from the vast irradiant murk of night there rose and fell in wavelike nodes the huge fused roar and mumble of the crowd.

When we had devoured our sandwiches and finished our beer, Heinrich suggested that we now make a determined effort to find seats within the hall, and I, who had heretofore felt a strong repulsion towards the thick air and roaring chaos of the hall, now found to my surprise that I was ready and eager to join the vast crowd of beer-fumed feeders. Obediently now I joined the line of patient Germans who were shuffling slowly through the doors and in a moment more I found myself enveloped by a cyclone of drunken sound, tramping patiently with a crowd that moved slowly around the great room looking for seats. Presently, peering through the veils and planes of shifting smoke that coiled and rose in the great hall like smoke above a battlefield, Heinrich spied two seats at a table near the center of the room, where, on the square wooden platform, forty men dressed in peasant costume were producing a deafening noise upon brass instruments. We plunged directly for the seats, jostling and half-falling over unprotesting bodies that were numb with beer.

And at last, dead center of that roaring tumult, we seated ourselves triumphantly, panting victoriously, and immediately ordered two liters of dark beer and two plates of schweinwurstl and sauerkraut. The band was blaring forth the strains of "Ein Prosit! Ein Prosit!" and all over the room people had risen from their tables and were standing with arms linked and mugs upraised while they roared out the great drinking song and swung and rocked rhythmically back and forth.

The effect of these human rings all over that vast and murky hall had in it something that was almost supernatural and ritualistic: something that belonged to the essence of a race was enclosed in those rings, something dark and strange as Asia, something older than the old barbaric forests, something that had swayed around an



altar, and had made a human sacrifice, and had devoured burnt flesh.

The hall was roaring with their powerful voices, it shook to their powerful bodies, and as they swung back and forth it seemed to me that nothing on earth could resist them—that they must smash whatever they came against. I understood now why other nations feared them so; suddenly I was myself seized with a deadly fear of them that froze my heart. I felt as if I had dreamed and awakened in a strange barbaric forest to find a ring of savage barbaric faces bent down above me—blond-braided, blond-mustached, they leaned upon their mighty spear staves, rested on their shields of toughened hide, as they looked down. And I was surrounded by them, there was no escape.

I thought of all that was familiar to me, and it seemed far away, not only in another world but in another time, sea-sunken in eternity ages hence from the old dark forest of barbaric time. And now I thought almost with warm friendliness of the strange dark faces of the Frenchmen, their cynicism, and dishonesty, their rapid and excited voices, their small scale, their little customs; even all their light and trivial adulteries now seemed friendly and familiar, playful, charming, full of grace. Or of the dogged English, with their pipes, their pubs, their bitter beer, their fog, their drizzle, their women with neighing voices and long teeth—all these things now seemed immensely warm, friendly and familiar to me, and I wished that I were with them.

But suddenly a hand was slipped around my arm, and through that roar and fog of sound I realized that someone was speaking to me. I looked down and there beside me saw the jolly, flushed and smiling face of a pretty girl. She tugged at my arm good-naturedly and mischievously, spoke to me, nodded her head for me to look. I turned. Beside me was a young man, her companion; he too smiling, happy, held his arm for me to take. I looked across and saw Heinrich, his sallow, lonely, pitted face smiling and happy as I had never seen it before. He nodded to me. In an instant we too were all linked together, swinging, swaying, singing in rhythm to the roar of those tremendous voices, swinging and swaying, singing all together as the band played "Ein Prosit." Ended at length the music, but now all barriers broken through, all flushed and happy, smiling at one another, we added our own cheers to the crowd's great roar of affirmation when the song was ended. Then laughing, smiling, talking, we sat down again.

And now there was no strangeness any more. There were no barriers any more. We drank and talked and ate together. I drained liter after liter of the cold and heady beer. Its fumes mounted in my brain. I was jubilant and happy. I talked fearlessly in a broken jargon of my little German. Heinrich helped me out from time to time, and

yet it did not matter. I felt that I had known all these people all my life, forever. The young girl with her jolly pretty face eagerly tried to find out who I was and what I did. I teased her. I would not tell her. I told her a dozen things—that I was a Norwegian, an Australian, a carpenter, a sailor, anything that popped into my head, and Heinrich, smiling, aided and abetted me in all my foolishness. But the girl clapped her hands and gleefully cried out, "No," that she knew what I was—I was an artist, a painter, a creative man. She and all the others turned to Heinrich, asking him if this was not true. And smilingly he half inclined his head and said that I was not a painter but that I was a writer—he called me a poet. And then all of them nodded their heads in satisfied affirmation, the girl gleefully clapped her hands together again and cried out that she had known it. And now we drank and linked our arms and swayed and swung together in a ring again. And presently, now that it was growing late and people had begun to leave the hall, we too got up, the six of us, the girl, another girl, their two young men, and Heinrich and myself, moved out among the singing, happy crowds again, and arm in arm, linked all together, moved singing through the crowds.

And then we left them, finally, four young people from the mass of life and from the heart of Germany, whom I should never see again—four people and the happy, flushed and smiling face of a young girl. We left them, never having asked their names, nor they our own; we left them and lost them, with warmth, with friendship, with affection in the hearts of all of us.

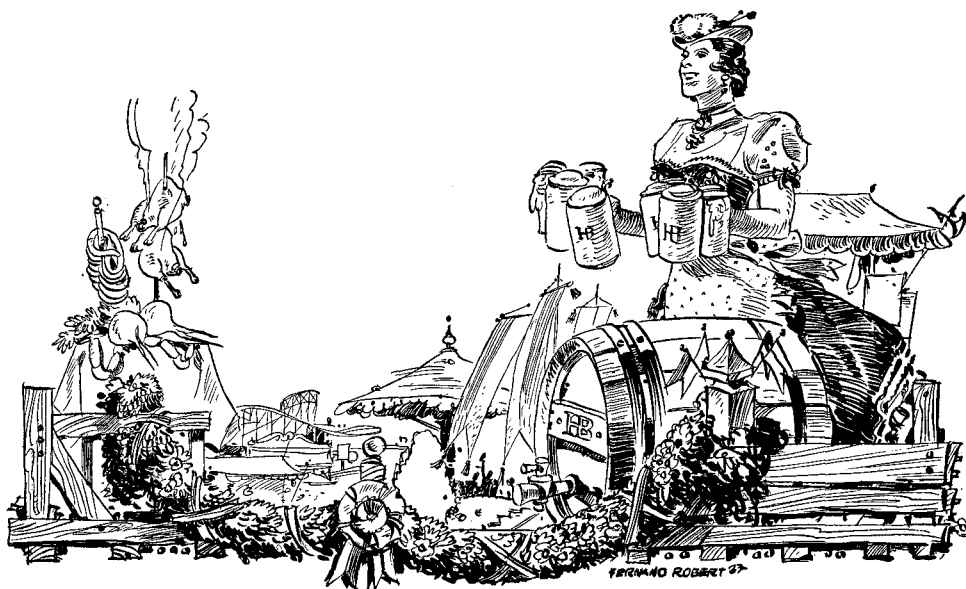
We went our way, and they went theirs. The great roar and clamor of the fair suffused and faded far behind us, until it had become a vast and drowsy distant murmur. And presently, walking arm in arm together, we reached again the railway station and the ancient heart of Munich. We crossed the Karlsplatz and at last we

reached our dwelling in the Theresien and Louisen streets.

And yet we found we were not tired, we were not ready to go in. The fumes of the powerful and heady beer, and more than that the fumes of fellowship and of affection, of friendship and of human warmth, had mounted to our brains and hearts. We knew it was a rare and precious thing, a moment's spell of wonder and of joy, that it must end, and we were loath to see it go.

It was a glorious night, the air sharp, frosty, and the street deserted, and far away, like time, like the ceaseless and essential murmur of eternity, the distant, drowsy, wavelike hum of the great fair. The sky was cloudless, radiant, and in the sky there blazed a radiant blank of moon. We paused a moment at our dwelling, then as by mutual instinct walked away. We went along the streets and presently we had arrived before the enormous, silent and moon-sheeted blankness of the Old Pinakothek. We passed before it, we entered on the grounds, we strode back and forth, our feet striking cleanly on clean gravel. Arm in arm we talked, we sang, we laughed together. "A poet, yes," he cried, and looked exultantly at the blazing moon. "A poet, ja!" he cried again. "These people did not know you and they said you were a poet. And you are."

And in the moonlight, his lonely, scarred, and pitted face was transfigured by a look of happiness. And we walked the streets, we walked the streets. We felt the sense of something priceless and unutterable, a world invisible that we must see, a world intangible that we must touch, a world of warmth, of joy, of imminent and impending happiness, of impossible delight, that was almost ours. And we walked the streets, we walked the streets. The moon blazed blank and cold out of the whited brilliance of the sky. And the streets were silent. All the doors were closed. And from the distance came the last and muted murmurs of the fair. And we went home.



Scribner's American Painters Series

No. 4 — "GREENLAND WOMAN," BY ROCKWELL KENT

ART," Rockwell Kent once wrote, "is a by-product of one's enthusiasm for life." It is this powerful drive for experiencing things that is the keynote to the life of the man who is today one of the healthiest influences on American art. His work is very definitely the result of experiences that are both physical and intellectual, never purely esthetic. As he himself has pointed out, "no artist ever *looked* for material, whether it was mountains for a picture or a love affair for a book."

Born in Tarrytown, New York, in 1882, he received his early training in the plastic arts under such men as Chase, Robert Henri, Kenneth Hayes Miller, Thayer, and at the Columbia School of Architecture, but Kent is one of the few outstanding American artists who owes nothing to the current French tradition.

Very early in life he was drawn to the sea. The desire to want what he did not have and to do what was most difficult brought him to the crude life of the New England fishermen of Monhegan Island. He began to work with his hands, carpentering, lobstering, and going down to the boats in the icy dawn of our northeastern fishing waters. Gradually he ventured farther, as this life grew upon him, and we find him in Newfoundland in 1915. Shortly afterward he went to Alaska and recorded his experiences in one of his famous illustrated books, *Wilderness*. His next book, *Voyaging*, describing his journey to Tierra del Fuego, is the story of a man who wants to do the most difficult things. He went there, he tells us, because he "had read that it was the worst place in the world." Kent says:

"Everywhere I have been I have had enthusiasms and excitements. I have stood in spots where I have known that I was the first white man who had ever seen that country. . . . And because I have been alone so much and have been moved so much by what I have seen I have had to paint it and write about

it. And by virtue of that need to paint and write I am an artist."

It is this series of emotional and physical incidents that have made the work of Rockwell Kent so powerful and direct. Since very few artists have undergone the unusual experiences that he has had, it would appear fruitless to make comparisons, but it is certain that the primeval and immense quality of nature with its clear skies and virginal expanses of snow has been accurately and sincerely rendered by him.

The water color that is reproduced in this issue, "Greenland Woman," is a sketch made by the artist during his recent visit to that country, described in *Salamina*, one of his finest illustrated books. *Salamina* is the name of the native housekeeper who looked after Mr. Kent's party during their year-long stay in the North, and the story is an almost epic appreciation of the natives of Greenland.

This sketch, like most of Mr. Kent's work, is characterized by simplicity of subject matter, tightness of composition, and a monumentality of effect that would be just as successful if used as the basis for a larger painting or fresco. To achieve a "large" quality in such a small area is the thing that this artist does best, as witnessed by his impressive illustrations for such books as *Moby Dick*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *Beowulf*, and *Leaves of Grass*.

When we survey the range of Kent's interests: painting, illustration, lithography, exploration, murals, writing, music (he plays the flute), lecturing, and editing, he begins to emerge as one of those "complete" men of the Renaissance that one reads about. Mr. Kent has built himself a beautiful house in the Adirondacks, containing a marvelous collection of pictures, books, and music. These "civilized" activities are only one side of his being, for he has a keen business sense, and has distinguished himself in advertising, publishing, magazine illustration, and book-plate design.

"Scribner's American Painters Series" is edited and supervised by Bernard Myers.

Picture, courtesy Weyhe Gallery, New York.