



Mogens and Other Stories

Jens Peter Jacobsen

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In the decade from 1870 to 1880 a new spirit was stirring in the intellectual and literary world of Denmark. George Brandes was delivering his lectures on the Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature; from Norway came the deeply probing questionings of the granitic Ibsen; from across the North Sea from England echoes of the evolutionary theory and Darwinism. It was a time of controversy and bitterness, of a conflict joined between the old and the new, both going to extremes, in which nearly every one had a share. How many of the works of that period are already out-worn, and how old-fashioned the theories that were then so violently defended and attacked! Too much logic, too much contention for its own sake, one might say, and too little art. This was the period when Jens Peter Jacobsen began to write, but he stood aside from the conflict, content to be merely artist, a creator of beauty and a seeker after truth, eager to bring into the realm of literature "the eternal laws of nature, its glories, its riddles, its miracles," as he once put it. That is why his work has retained its living colors until to-day, without the least trace of fading. There is in his work something of the passion for form and style that one finds in Flaubert and Pater, but where they are often hard, percussive, like a piano, he is soft and strong and intimate like a violin on which he plays his reading of life. Such analogies, however, have little significance, except that they indicate a unique and powerful artistic personality. Jacobsen is more than a mere stylist. The art of writers who are too consciously that is a sort of decorative representation of life, a formal composition, not a plastic composition. One element particularly characteristic of Jacobsen is his accuracy of observation and minuteness of detail welded with a deep and intimate understanding of the human heart. His characters are not studied tissue by tissue as under a scientist's microscope, rather they are built up living cell by living cell out of the author's experience and imagination. He shows how they are conditioned and modified by their physical being, their inheritance and environment, Through each of his senses he lets impressions from without pour into him. He harmonizes them with a passionate desire for beauty into marvelously plastic figures and moods. A style which grows thus organically from within is style out of richness; the other is style out of poverty.

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