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A Great Norwegian

The first notion that the amazed foreigner is apt to gather from a study of the career of Bjornstjerne Bjornson, the great Norwegian who died on Monday, in Paris, is that the man himself never really existed. Such paragons of all the virtues and masters of all the arts belong properly not to real life, nor even to ordinary romance, but to the great sagas and race myths. Bjornson in brief, was entirely impossible, just as the estimable Gargantua was impossible—and yet he actually lived in the world for nearly 80 years, doing the work of a hundred men, and it will be centuries, perhaps, before Norway loses the impress of his personality.

Imagine a man who was at once his country's foremost politician and her foremost poet, her greatest living dramatist and her greatest living orator, her principal journalist and her principal philosopher, her leading authority upon education, hygiene, the tariff, eugenics, philology and the rotation of crops, and, to top it all, the greatest novelist in her entire history! Such a man was Bjornstjerne Bjornson. Beside his protean genius, the versatility of Mr. Roosevelt shrinks to narrow specialism. Compared to him, the Admirable Crichton was a dabbler and Aristotle a drone.

Ibsen And Bjornson

The history of Norway since the '50s is the history of that one incredible man. He instilled intelligent ambition into his countrymen; he changed them from dreaming dullards into an alert, efficient race; he was their benevolent despot, their master idealist, their bold pioneer, their heartener, their Moses. In that small Scandinavian pond, indeed, he was a frog of truly gigantic proportions. No other country has ever had a citizen of such insatiable patriotism and of such multifarious public services.

The Norway into which Bjornson was born, in 1832, was a country cut off from the great world and its events. The Norwegian people, glooming among their gaunt fjords, had begun to lose touch with progress and reality. Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" might well have stood as their archetype. Eternally looking backward toward their lost glories, they were disposed to lay the blame for their present insignificance upon sinister conspiracies and the intolerable humors of fate. Like Peer, they dreamed of kingship, but like Peer again, they failed to act out their dreams.

Ibsen, growing conscious, as a young man, of this national vapidity, shook the dust of Norway from his feet and went to live abroad; first in Italy and then in Germany. For nearly 30 years he was a Norwegian in name only. All things Norwegian provoked his contempt. In his early poetical plays he thundered at his countrymen, and in his later social dramas he seemed to be trying to forget that he was one of them. The thing he

admired most was that efficiency which the Germans began to show in such bountiful measure after 1870, and which the Norwegians seemed to lack altogether. More than once, it is said, he was actually tempted to renounce his Norwegian citizenship and become a German subject.

The Moses Of Norway

Bjornson, like Ibsen, came to manhood in discontent. He, too, was alive to the fallings of his countrymen and thoroughly convinced that they could never hope to make a noise in the world unless they abandoned their vague dreams and put their faith in hard work. But, instead of turning his back upon them in disgust, as Ibsen had done, he undertook to infuse something of his own electric energy into them. In other words, he foreswore the role of critic and undertook that of leader. He would be, not a Jeremiah, sounding warnings, not even a John the Baptist prophesying a new order, but a veritable Moses, leading his people out of their wilderness.

It would be impossible, without tediousness, to recite, even in a bare catalogue, the successive steps of Bjornson's extraordinary patriotic crusade. At the beginning of it, no doubt, his own notion of the path to be followed was uncertain. Leastways he seems to have had no very definite program. All he apparently aimed to do, in his twenties, was to awaken the national consciousness of his people, to prove to them that the day of great deeds was not ended, to convince them that they could accomplish much by merely standing together.

More than one half-touch appears in the doings of those early years. Bjornson preached a rather absurd jihad upon Danish dominance in Scandinavian literature and against the use of the Danish dialect in Norwegian books. He demanded a hearing for Norwegian dramatists, writing plays himself to prove that a Norwegian drama still existed; he demanded government aid for Norwegian poets, and accepted a pension himself, to prove that such aid would not be wasted.

At the age of 27 he essayed to write a national hymn for his countrymen. It was a flowery, intensely patriotic composition called "Ja, Vi Elsker Dette Handet" ("Yes, we love this country"), and it gave the lie to all precedents by becoming popular at once. Today the Norwegians sing it with a will on all high days and holidays. In Christiania on May 17, 1900, it was sung by a chorus of 25,000 children, all clad in their Sunday clothes and waving flags.

An Ardent Republican

After a few years of this somewhat rhetorical preliminary agitation Bjornson began to formulate his ideas more definitely. What he now demanded was a greater measure of autonomy for Norway—a breaking away from the Swedish yoke. That idea fell upon fertile soil, and its quick growth made its author more bold. He became, in fact, an ardent republican and began to advocate the establishment of an independent Norwegian state—a sort of ideal republic founded upon the guarantee of a square deal for every man, high or low. Time was destined to see that plan rejected for another of a less revolutionary sort, but the campaign of the politician poet resulted in a marvelous national awakening. The Norwegians in brief, began to regain faith in themselves, to

grapple with the problems of life in an intelligent and efficient manner, to make progress in all lines of endeavor. The ultimate fruits of that new spirit were the bloodless revolt against Sweden, the establishment of the new Norwegian democracy, with a sort of citizen king at its head, and the inauguration of an era of unprecedented prosperity and progress.

Bjornson's weapons in that long fight of his against the old order of things had been of divers and motley kinds. He wrote daring patriotic poetry, he harangued his countrymen in the newspapers, and on the stump he engaged in stupendous feuds with reactionary leaders, he traveled about the earth telling the story of Norway's hopes, he attacked old laws and proposed new ones, he wrote dialectic dramas and novels, and he made speeches on all possible occasions and before audiences of all conceivable sorts. A man of imposing physique, of great eloquence and sunny, ingratiating manner, he was of enormous effectiveness as a hand-shaker and spellbinder. Upon students and statesmen, peasants and magnates alike, he had the same electrifying influence. His mere appearance seemed to be enough to make converts and a few words from his quickly turned those converts into enthusiasts.

A Protean Moses

After the main battle had been won, Bjornson began planting a multitude of crops upon the battlefield. The adoring Norwegians looked to him for advice and leadership in all national, communal and personal emergencies. He undertook the reform of the public school system, he advocated a change in the national flag, he gave counsel regarding public hygiene, municipal government, foreign relations, intensive agriculture and the merchant marine. There was something almost comic in the confidence his countrymen showed in his judgment and in the readiness with which he laid down the law. He turned quite easily from arguments for universal peace to arguments against domineering mothers-in-law. Upon the latter subject, in fact, he actually wrote a play, and what is more, the Norwegians received it quite gravely.

Naturally enough all this deadly earnestness had so good influence upon Bjornson, the literary artist. As a very young, he had written a number of exquisite pastorals and upon them, it is probable, his fame as an imaginative writer must rest, at least outside of his own country. There is sound and abiding merit in these youthful sketches; they bring us very near to the simple present and are almost without rivals in their unstudied lightness and charm. Beautiful lyrics are scattered through them, they are, in every sense works of art of the first rank.

But Bjornson's later writings have no such merits. The novels and plays of his last phase, indeed, are little more than elaborate sermons. They deal with all sorts of imminent social problems, from woman's suffrage to the double standard of morality, and they lay down the law with ponderous solemnity. As playwrights Ibsen and Bjornson had much influence, one upon the other, but Ibsen was always the greater artist. He was well aware that the dramatist must be content, in his own phrase, to ask a question, without straightway attempting to answer it. Bjornson either forgot that maxim, or else boldly denied its truth. Whatever the process, he was led into the error of erecting a pulpit upon the stage, and the result is that his dramas have made but small stir in the world. In Scandinavia, of course, some of them are extremely popular, for their matter interest,

even if their manner is unsound, and in Germany, too, they are not without admirers, for the German thirst for disputation is so nearly insatiable that even the theatre must become a philosophical grove; but elsewhere Bjornson is ranked far below Ibsen. His chief fame, in truth, must rest upon his public services rather than upon his writings. He was a great Norwegian rather than a great artist.