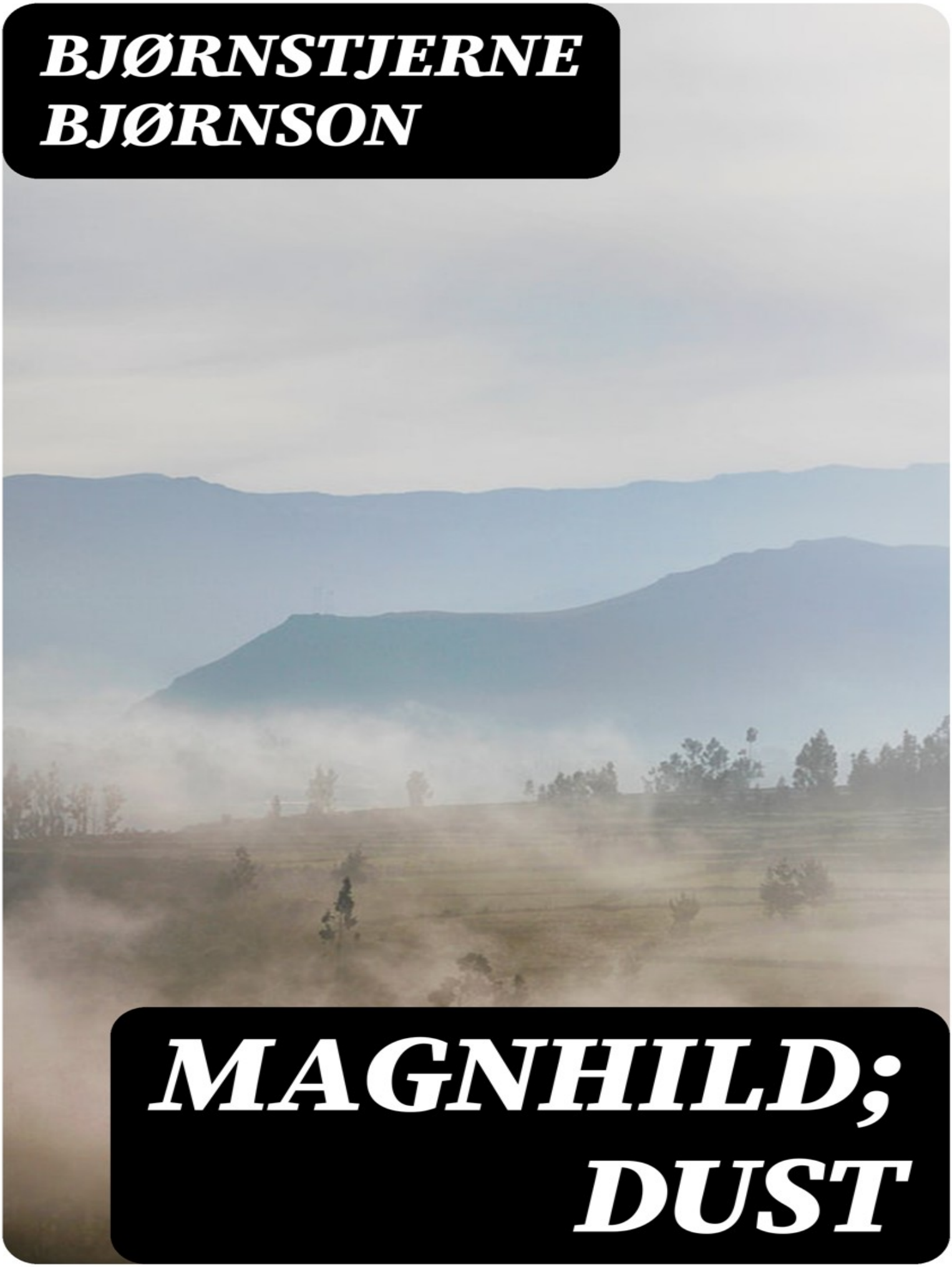
BJØRNSTJERNE BJØRNSON



MAGNHILD; DUST

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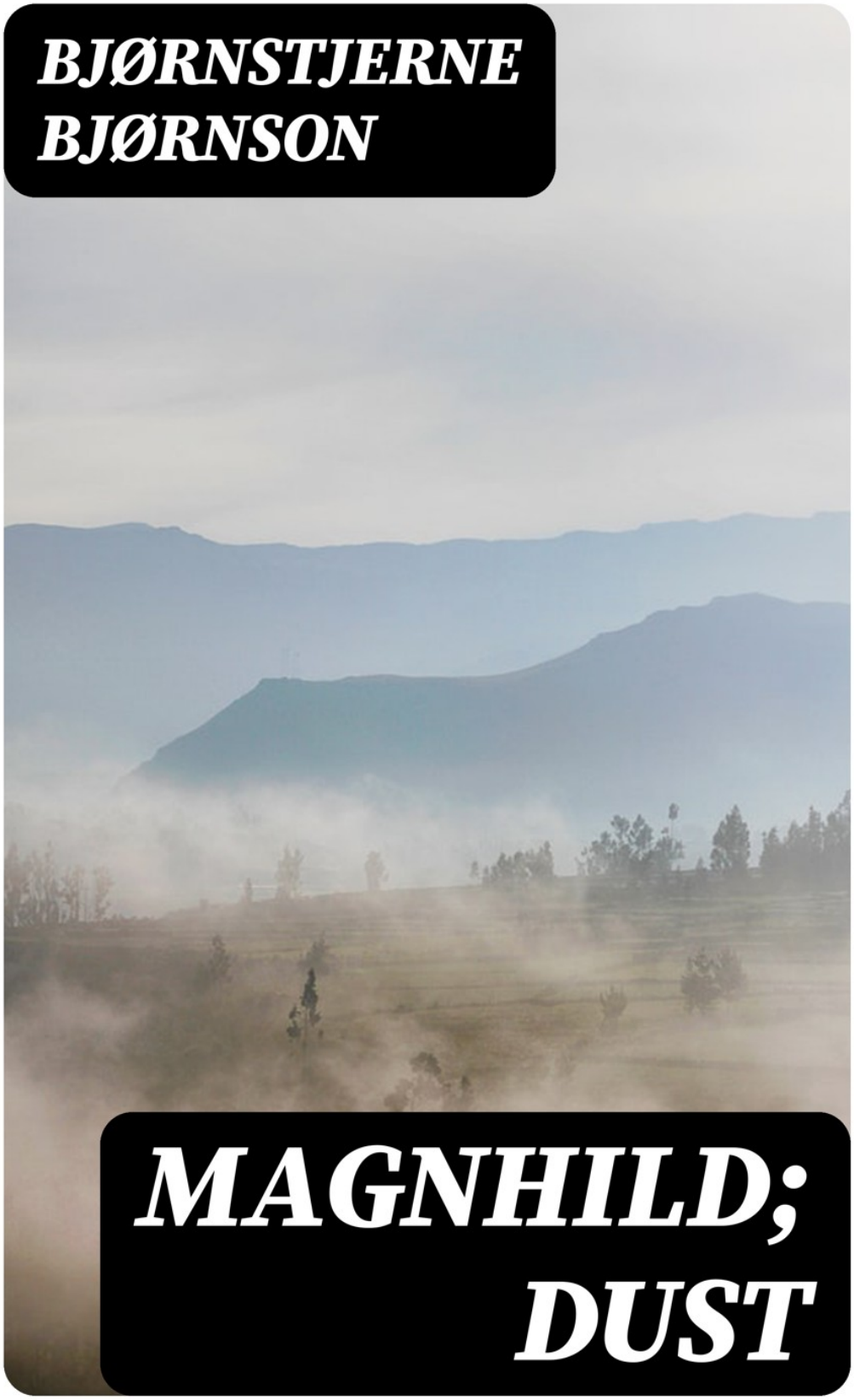

MAGNHILD; DUST

Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson

Magnhild; Dust

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PREFACE.

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"MAGNHILD" was planned during the summer of 1873, while the translator accompanied Mr. Björnson on a journey across Norway. The story is located in Lærdalen and Skarlie's home is in Lærdalsören, a small town at the head of one of the branches of the far-famed Sognefjord on the west coast. I well remember with what care the author made his observations. The story was written the following winter in Rome, but was not published until 1877, when it appeared in the original in Copenhagen and in a German translation in the *Rundschau* simultaneously.

The reader will see that "Magnhild" is a new departure, and marks a new epoch in Björnson's career as a writer of fiction. It is but justice to say that Mr. Björnson himself looks upon this as one of his less finished works, and yet I believe that many of his American readers will applaud the manner in which he has here championed the rights of a woman when she has become united with such a man as Skarlie.

The celebration, on the 10th of August, 1882, of the twenty-fifth anniversary since the publication of "Synnöve Solbakken," was a great success. The day was celebrated by his friends in all parts of Scandinavia and by many of his admirers in Germany, France, and Italy. At Aulestad (his home in Norway), more than two hundred of his personal friends from the Scandinavian countries were assembled, among whom may be mentioned the eminent Swedish journalist Hedlund, the Danish poet Drachmann, and the Norwegian author Kristofer Janson. Over Aulestad, which

was handsomely decorated, floated Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, and American flags. There was a great banquet, at which speeches and poems were not wanting. Mr. Björnson received a number of valuable presents and countless telegrams from Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, England, and America.

This volume closes the present series of translations of Björnson's works. The seven volumes[1] now published contain all the novels and short stories that Björnson has written. His other works are, as shown in the biographical introduction to "Synnöve Solbakken," chiefly dramas.

[1] The first edition of Björnson's writings, from which the present edition is arranged, was in seven volumes. "Magnhild" formed the seventh volume, and the present preface is reprinted as it there stood.

Being thus about to send my last Björnson manuscript to the publishers, I desire to express my hearty thanks to the press and to the public for the generous reception they have given these stories as they have appeared one by one. Those who are acquainted with Björnson's original and idiomatic style can appreciate the many difficulties his translators have had to contend with. I am fully conscious of my shortcomings and am particularly aware of my failure to transmit the peculiar national flavor of Björnson's style, but I have done my best, and have turned his phrases into as good English as I could command. Others might have been more successful, but they could not have taken more pains, nor could they have derived more pleasure from the work than I have found in it. To Auber Forestier, who has kindly assisted me in the translation of the whole series, I once more extend my hearty thanks. Without her able help the work could not have progressed so rapidly. Finally, I

commend "Magnhild" to the tender mercy of the critic and to the good-will of the reader, and say adieu!

RASMUS B. ANDERSON.

ASGARD, MADISON, WISCONSIN.
November, 1882.

MAGNHILD.

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CHAPTER I.

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THE landscape has high, bold mountains, above which are just passing the remnants of a storm. The valley is narrow and continually winding. Coursing through it is a turbulent stream, on one side of which there is a road. At some distance up the slopes farms are spread; the buildings are mostly low and unpainted, yet numerous; heaps of mown hay and fields of half ripe grain are dotted about.

When the last curve of the valley is left behind the fjord becomes visible. It lies sparkling beneath an uplifting fog. So completely is it shut in by mountains that it looks like a lake.

Along the road there jogs at the customary trot a horse with a cariole-skyds.[2] In the cariole may be seen a waterproof coat and a south-wester, and between these a beard, a nose, and a pair of spectacles. Lashed to the back seat is a trunk, and seated on this, with her back to the cariole, is a full-grown "skyds"-girl, snugly bundled up in a

kerchief. She sits there dangling her coarsely-shod feet. Her arms are tucked in under the kerchief. Suddenly she bursts out with: "Magnhild! Magnhild!"

[2] Conveyance.

The traveler turned to look after a tall woman in a waterproof cloak who had just walked past. He had caught a glimpse of a delicately-outlined face, beneath a hood which was drawn over the brow; now he saw the owner standing with her forefinger in her mouth, staring. As he was somewhat persistent in his gaze, she blushed.

"I will step in just as soon as I put up the horse," called out the skyds-girl.

They drove on.

"Who was that, my dear?" asked the traveler.

"She is the wife of the saddler down at yonder point," was the reply.

In a little while they had advanced far enough to gain a view of the fjord and the first houses on the point. The skyds-girl reined in the horse and jumped down from the trunk. She first attended to the animal's appearance, and then busied herself with her own toilet. It had ceased raining, and she removed her kerchief, folded it, and stowed it away in a little pocket in front of the cariole. Then thrusting her fingers under her head-kerchief she tried to arrange her hair, which hung in matted locks over her cheeks.

"She had such a singular look,"—he pointed over his shoulders.

The girl fixed her eyes on him, and she began to hum. Presently she interrupted herself with,—

"Do you remember the land-slide you passed a few miles above here?"

"I passed so many land-slides."

She smiled.

"Yes; but the one I mean is on the other side of a church."

"It was an old land-slide?"

"Yes; it happened long ago. But that is where once lay the gard belonging to her family. It was swept away when she was eight or nine years old. Her parents, brothers and sisters, and every living thing on the gard, perished. She alone was saved. The land-slide bore her across the stream, and she was found by the people who hastened to the spot, —she was insensible."

The traveler became absorbed in thought.

"She must be destined to something," said he, at last.

The girl looked up. She waited some time, but their eyes did not meet. So she resumed her seat on the trunk, and they drove on.

The valley widened somewhat in the vicinity of the point; farms were spread over the plain: to the right lay the church with the churchyard around it; a little farther on the point itself, a small town, with a large number of houses, most of which were but one story high and were either painted white and red or not painted at all; along the fjord ran the wharf. A steamer was just smoking there; farther down, by the mouth of the river, might be seen a couple of old brigs taking in their cargoes.

The church was new, and showed an attempt at imitating the old Norse wooden church architecture. The traveler must have had some knowledge of this, for he stopped,

gazed a while at the exterior, then alighted, went through the gateway, and into the church; both gate and door stood open. He was scarcely inside of the building when the bells began to ring; through the opening he saw a bridal procession coming up from the little town. As he took his departure the procession was close by the churchyard gate, and by this he stood while it moved in: the bridegroom, an elderly man, with a pair of large hands and a large face, the bride, a young girl, with a plump, round face, and of a heavy build. The bridesmaids were all clad in white and wore gloves; not one of them ventured to bestow more than a side glance at the stranger; most of them stooped, one was hump-backed; there was not one who could truly be said to have a fine form.

Their male friends lagged behind, in gray, brown, and black felt hats, and long frock coats, pea-jackets, or round-abouts. Most of them had a lock of hair drawn in front of the ear, and those who had beards wore them to cover the entire chin. The visages were hard, the mouths usually coarse; most of them had tobacco stains about the corners of their mouths, and some had cheeks distended with tobacco-quids.

Involuntarily the traveler thought of her in the waterproof cloak. Her history was that of the landscape. Her refined, unawakened face hung as full of yearning as the mountains of showers; everything that met his eye, both landscape and people, became a frame for her.

As he approached the road, the skyds-girl hastened to the wayside where the horse was grazing. While she was

tugging at the reins she continued to gaze fixedly at the bridal procession.

"Are you betrothed?" asked the stranger, smiling.

"He who is to have me has no eyes yet," she replied, in the words of a proverb.

"Then, I suppose, you are longing to get beyond your present position," said he, adding: "Is it to America?"

She was surprised; that query was evidently well aimed.

"Is it in order that you may more speedily earn your traveling expenses that you have gone into the skyds line? Do you get plenty of fees? Hey?"

Now she colored. Without uttering a word in reply, she promptly took her seat on the trunk with her back to the stranger, before he had stepped into the cariole.

Soon they had neared the white-painted hotels which were situated on either side of the street close by the entrance to the little town. In front of one of these they paused. By the balustrade above stood a group of carriers, chiefly young fellows; they had most likely been watching the bridal procession and were now waiting for steamer-bound travelers. The stranger alighted and went in, while the girl busied herself with unstrapping the trunk. Some one must have offered her help, for as the traveler approached the window he saw her push from her a great lubberly boy in a short jacket. In all probability some impertinence had also been offered her and had been repaid in the same coin, for the other carriers set up a shout of laughter. The girl came walking in with the heavy trunk. The traveler opened the door for her, and she laughed as she met him. While he was counting out her money to her, he said,—

"I agree with you, Rönnaug, you ought to be off to America as soon as possible."

He now handed her two specie dollars as her fee.

"This is my mite for your fund," said he, gravely.

She regarded him with wide-open eyes and open mouth, took the money, returned thanks, and then put up both hands to stroke back her hair, for it had again fallen out of place. While thus engaged she dropped some of the coins she held in one half-closed hand. She stooped to pick them up, and as she did so some of the hooks in her boddice gave way. This loosened her kerchief and one end fell out, for a knot in one corner contained something heavy. While readjusting this she again dropped her money. She got off at last, however, with all her abundance, and was assailed with a volley of rude jests. This time she made no reply; but she cast a shy glance into the hotel as she drove the horse past, full trot.

It was the traveler's lot to see her once more; for as he passed down to the steamer, later in the day, she was standing with her back turned toward the street, at a door over which hung a sign-board bearing the inscription: "Skarlie, Saddler." As he drew nearer he beheld Magnhild in the inner passage. She had not yet removed her waterproof cloak, although the rain had long since ceased. Even the hood was still drawn over her head. Magnhild was the first to espy the stranger, and she drew farther back into the house; Rönnaug turned, and then she too moved into the passage.

That evening Rönnaug's steamer ticket was bought; for the sum was complete. Magnhild did not undress after

Rönnaug had gone home late in the evening. She sat in a large arm-chair in the little low room, or restlessly paced the floor. And once, with her heavy head pressed against the window pane, she said half aloud,—

"Then she must be destined to something."

CHAPTER II.

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She had heard these words before.

The first time it was in the churchyard that blustering winter day her fourteen relatives were buried,—all whom she had loved, both parents and grandparents, and brothers and sisters. In fancy she saw the scene again! The wind had here and there swept away the snow, the pickets of the fence stood out in sharp prominence, huge rocks loomed up like the heads of monsters whose bodies were covered by the snow-drifts. The wind whistled behind the little group of mourners through the open church porch whose blinds had been taken out, and down from the old wooden belfry came the clanging toll of the bell, like one cry of anguish after another.

The people that were gathered together were blue with the cold; they wore mittens and their garments were closely buttoned up. The priest appeared in sea-boots and had on a skin suit beneath his gown; his hands also were eased in large mittens, and he vigorously fought the air round about him with these. He waved one of them toward Magnhild.

"This poor child," said he, "remained standing on her feet, and with her little sled in her hand she was borne

downward and across the frozen stream,—the sole being the Lord saw fit to save. To what is she destined?"

She rode home with the priest, sitting on his lap. He had commended her to the care of the parish, and took her home with him "for the present," in order to set a good example. She nestled up to his fur overcoat, with her small cold hands inside of his huge mittens, beside his soft, plump hands. And all the while she kept thinking: "What am I destined to, I wonder?"

She presumed that her mind would become clear on this point when she got into the house. But nothing met her eye here she had not seen before until she entered the inner room, where a piano which some one was just playing in the highest degree attracted her.

But for that very reason she forgot the thought she had brought in with her.

In this household there were two daughters, heavy-looking girls, with small round heads and long, thick braids of light hair. They had recently been provided with a governess, a pale, though fleshy person, with her neck more exposed and her sleeves more open than Magnhild had ever seen in any one before. Her voice sounded as though it needed clearing, and Magnhild involuntarily coughed several times; but this was of no avail. The governess asked Magnhild's name and inquired if she knew how to read, to which Magnhild replied in the affirmative. Her whole family had been noted for their love of reading. And then the governess proposed, still with the same husky after-tone in her voice, that she should be allowed to share the

instructions of the little girls, in order to spur them on. Magnhild was one year older than the elder.

The mistress of the house was sitting by, engaged with her embroidery. She now glanced up at Magnhild and said, "With pleasure," then bent over her work again. She was a person of medium size, neither thin nor stout, and had a small head with fair hair. The priest, who was heavy and corpulent, came down-stairs after removing his gown; he was smoking, and as he crossed the floor, he said, "There comes a man with fish," and passed out of the room again.

The youngest girl once more attacked her scales. Magnhild did not know whether she should remain where she was, or go back to the kitchen. She sat on the wood-box by the stove tormented with the uncertainty, when dinner was announced in the adjoining room. All work was put aside, and the little one at the piano closed the instrument. Now when Magnhild was alone and heard the rattling of the knives, she began to cry; for she had not yet eaten a morsel that day. During the meal the priest came out from the dining-room; for it had been decided that he had not bought enough fish. He opened the window and called out to the man to wait until dinner was over. As he turned to go back into the dining-room he espied the little one on the wood-box.

"Are you hungry?" asked he.

The child made no reply. He had lived long enough among the peasants to know that her silence meant "yes," and so taking her by the hand he led her to the table, where room was silently made for her.

In the afternoon she went coasting with the little girls, and then joined them in their studies and had a lesson in Bible history with them; after this she partook of the afternoon lunch with them, and then played with them until they were called to supper, which they all ate at the same table. She slept that night on a lounge in the dining-room and took part the next day in the duties of the priest's daughters.

She had no clothes except those she had on; but the governess made over an old dress for her; some articles of old linen belonging to one of the little girls were given to her, and a pair of their mother's boots. The lounge she had slept on was removed from the dining-room, because it occupied the space needed for some shoemakers who were to "see the household well shod." It was placed in the kitchen, but was in the way there; then in the bed-room of the maid-servants, but there the door continually struck against it; finally it was carried up to the nursery. Thus it was that Magnhild came to eat, work, and sleep with the priest's daughters; and as new clothes were never made for her she naturally fell to wearing theirs.

Quite as much by chance she began to play the piano. It was discovered that she had more talent for music than the daughters of the house, so it was thought best that she should learn, in order to help them. Moreover, she grew tall, and developed a fine voice for singing. The governess took great pains in teaching her to sing by note; she did so at first merely in the mechanical way she did everything, later because the remarkable skill in reading at sight which her pupil developed under her guidance proved a diversion to

them all in their mountain solitude. The priest could lie on the sofa (the place he most frequently occupied) and laugh aloud when he heard Magnhild running all sorts of exercises up and down like a squirrel in a tree. The result of this, so far as Magnhild was concerned, was that the young girl learned —not more music, as one might have supposed, but— basket-making.

The fact was that about this time there spread, like an epidemic among the people, the idea that skill in manual industries should be cultivated among the peasants, and propagators of the new doctrine appeared also in this parish. Magnhild was chosen as the first pupil; she was thought to have the most "dexterity." The first thing taught was basket-making, then double spinning, then weaving, especially of the more artistic kinds, and after this embroidery, etc., etc. She learned all these things very rapidly, that is to say, she learned zealously as long as she was gaining an insight into each; further development did not interest her. But as she was henceforth expected to teach others, grown people as well as children, it became a settled habit for her to repair twice each week to the public school where many were assembled. When anything had once become part of her daily routine she thought no more about it. The house that had given her shelter was responsible for this.

The mistress of the house made her daily regulation visits to the kitchen, cellar, and stables, the rest of the time she embroidered; the whole house was covered with embroidery. She might be taken for a fat spider, with a little round head, spinning its web over chairs, tables, beds,

sledges, and carts. Her voice was rarely heard; she was seldom addressed by any one.

The priest was much older than his wife. His face was characterized by its small proportion of nose, chin, and eyes, and its very large share of all else belonging to it. He had fared badly at his examination, and had been compelled to support himself by teaching until, when he was advancing in years, he had married one of his former pupils, a lady with quite a nice property. Then he betook himself to seeking a clerical appointment, "the one thing in which he had shown perseverance," as he was himself in the habit of playfully remarking. After a ten years' search he had succeeded in getting a call (not long since) to his present parish, and he could scarcely hope for a better one. He passed most of his time in lying on the sofa reading, chiefly novels, but also newspapers and periodicals.

The governess always sat in the same chair in which Magnhild had seen her the first day, took the same walk to the church and back each day, and never failed to be ready for her duties on the stroke of the clock. She gradually increased in weight until she became excessively stout; she continued to wear her neck bare and her sleeves open, furthermore to speak in the same husky voice, which no effort on her part had ever yet been able to clear.

The priest's daughters became stout and heavy like their father, although they had small round heads like their mother. Magnhild and they lived as friends, in other words, they slept in the same room, and worked, played, and ate together.

There were never any ideas afloat in this parish. If any chanced to find their way there from without they got no farther than the priest's study. The priest was not communicative. At the utmost he read aloud to his family some new or old novel that he had found diverting.

One evening they were all sitting round the table, and the priest, having yielded to the entreaties of the united family, was reading aloud the "Pickwick Club."

The kitchen door slowly opened and a large bald head, with a snub nose and smiling countenance, was thrust in. A short leg in very wide trousers was next introduced, and this was followed by a crooked and consequently still shorter one. The whole figure stooped as it turned on the crooked leg to shut the door. The intruder thus presented to the party the back of the before mentioned large head, with its narrow rim of hair, a pair of square-built shoulders, and an extraordinarily large seat, only half covered by a pea-jacket. Again he turned in a slanting posture toward the assembled party, and once more presented his smiling countenance with its snub-nose. The young girls bowed low over their work, a suppressed titter arose first from one piece of sewing and then from another.

"Is this the saddler?" asked the priest, rising to his feet.

"Yes," was the reply, as the new-comer limped forward, holding out a hand so astonishingly large and with such broad round finger tips that the priest was forced to look at it as he took it in his own. The hand was offered to the others; and when it came to Magnhild's turn she burst out laughing just as her hand disappeared within it. One peal of laughter after another was heard and suppressed. The priest

hastened to remark that they were reading the "Pickwick Club."

"Aha!" observed the saddler, "there is enough to make one laugh in that book."

"Have you read it?" asked the priest.

"Yes; when I was in America. I read most of the English writers; indeed, I have them all in my house now," he answered, and proceeded to give an account of the cheap popular editions that could be obtained in America.

The laughter of young girls is not easily subdued; it was still ready to bubble over when, after the saddler was furnished with a pipe, the reading was resumed. Now to be sure there was a pretext. After a while the priest grew tired and wanted to close the book, but the saddler offered to continue the reading for him, and was allowed to do so. He read in a dry, quiet manner, and with such an unfamiliar pronunciation of the names of the personages and localities introduced that the humor of the text became irresistible; even the priest joined in the laughter which no one now attempted to restrain. It never occurred to the girls to ask themselves why they were all obliged to laugh; they were still laughing when they went up-stairs to go to bed, and while undressing they imitated the saddler's walk, bowed and talked as he did, pronounced the foreign words with his English accent. Magnhild was the most adroit in mimicking; she had observed him the most closely.

At that time she was fifteen, in her sixteenth year.

The next day the girls passed every free moment in the dining-room, which had now been transformed into a work-shop. The saddler told them of a sojourn of several years in

America, and of travels in England and Germany; he talked without interrupting his work and with a frequent intermingling of jests. His narratives were accompanied by the incessant tittering of his listeners. They were scarcely aware themselves how they gradually ceased laughing at him and laughed instead at the witty things he said; neither did they observe until later how much they learned from him. He was so greatly missed by the girls when he left that more than half of their time together was occupied in conversation about him; this lasted for many days after he was gone, and never wholly ceased.

There were two things which had made the strongest impression on Magnhild. The first was the English and German songs the saddler had sung for them. She had paid little attention to the text, unless perhaps occasionally; but how the melodies had captivated her!

While singing hymns one Sunday they had first noticed that Skarlie had a fine voice. Thenceforth he was obliged to sing for them constantly. These foreign melodies of his fluttering thither from a fuller, richer life, freer conditions, larger ideas than their own, clung to Magnhild's fancy the entire summer. They were the first pictures which had awakened actual yearning within her breast. It may also be said that for the first time she comprehended what song was. As she was singing her interminable scales one day, before beginning her studies in singing from note, she came to a full realization of the fact that this song without melody was to her like wings beating against a cage: it fluttered up and down against walls, windows, doors, in perpetual and fruitless longing, aye, until at last it sank like the cobwebs,

over everything in the room. She could sit alone out of doors with *his* songs. While she was humming them, the forest hues dissolved into one picture; and that she had never discovered before. The density, the vigor in the tree-tops, above and below the tree-tops, over the entire mountain wall, as it were, overwhelmed her; the rushing of the waters of the stream attracted her.

The second thing which had made so deep an impression on her, and which was blended with all the rest, was Skarlie's story of how he had become lame. In America, when he was a young man, he had undertaken to carry a boy twelve years old from a burning house; he had fallen with the boy beneath the ruins. Both were extricated, Skarlie with a crushed limb, the boy unscathed. That boy was now one of the most noted men of America.

It was his lot to be saved, "he was destined to something."

This reminder again! The thought of her own fate had heretofore been shrouded in the wintry mantle of the churchyard, amid frost, weeping, and harsh clanging of bells; it had been something sombre. Now it flitted onward to large cities beyond the seas, among ships, burning houses, songs, and great destinies. From this time forth she dreamed of what she was destined to be as something far distant and great.

CHAPTER III.

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