

7 BEST SHORT STORIES BY BJORNSTIERNE BJORNSON

EDITED BY AUGUST NEMO



TACET BOOKS

7 BEST SHORT STORIES

Bjørnstjerne
Bjørnson

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August Nemo

Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[The Author](#)

[The Railroad and the Churchyard](#)

[The Father](#)

[The Bridal March](#)

[One Day](#)

[Mother's Hands](#)

[Throned](#)

[Absalom's Hair](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

The Author

BY WILLIAM MORTON PAYNE, LL.D.

Eight years ago, taking a bird's-eye view of the mountain peaks of contemporary literature, and writing with particular reference to Björnson's seventieth birthday, it seemed proper to make the following remarks about the most famous European authors then numbered among living men. If one were asked for the name of the greatest man of letters still living in the world, the possible claimants to the distinction would hardly be more than five in number. If it were a question of poetry alone, Swinburne would have to be named first, with Carducci for a fairly close second. But if we take literature in its larger sense, as including all the manifestations of creative activity in language, and if we insist, furthermore, that the man singled out for this preëminence shall stand in some vital relation to the intellectual life of his time, and exert a forceful influence upon the thought of the present day, the choice must rather be made among the three giants of the north of Europe, falling, as it may be, upon the great-hearted Russian emotionalist who has given us such deeply moving portrayals of the life of the modern world; or upon the passionate Norwegian idealist whose finger has so unerringly pointed out the diseased spots in the social organism, earning by his moral surgery the name of pessimist, despite his declared faith in the redemption of mankind through truth and freedom and love; or, perchance, upon that other great Norwegian, equally fervent in his devotion to the same ideals, and far more sympathetic in his manner of inculcating them upon his readers, who has just rounded out his scriptural tale of three

score years and ten, and, in commemoration of the anniversary, is now made the recipient of such a tribute of grateful and whole-souled admiration as few men have ever won, and none have better deserved. It would be certainly invidious, and probably futile, to attempt a nice, comparative estimate of the services of these three men to the common cause of humanity; let us be content with the admission that Björnstjerne Björnson is *primus inter pares*, and make no attempt to exalt him at the expense of his great contemporaries. Writing now eight years later, at the time when Björnson's death has plunged his country and the world in mourning, it is impressive to note that of the five men constituting the group above designated, Tolstoy alone survives to carry on the great literary tradition of the nineteenth century.

It will be well, however, to make certain distinctions between the life work of Björnson and that of the two men whom a common age and common aims bring into inevitable association with him. These distinctions are chiefly two,—one of them is that while Tolstoy and Ibsen grew to be largely cosmopolitan in their outlook, Björnson has much more closely maintained throughout his career the national, or, at any rate, the racial standpoint. The other is that while Tolstoy and Ibsen presently became, the one indifferent to artistic expression, and the other baldly prosaic where he was once deeply poetical, Björnson preserved the poetic impulse of his youth, and continued to give it play even in his envisagement of the most practical modern problems. Let us enlarge a little upon these two themes. Ernest Renan, speaking at the funeral of Tourguénieff, described the deceased novelist as "the incarnation of a whole people." Even more fittingly might the phrase be applied to Björnson, for it would be difficult to find anywhere else in modern literature a figure so completely and profoundly representative of his race. In the

frequently quoted words of Dr. Brandes, to speak the name of Björnson in any assembly of his countrymen is like "hoisting the Norwegian flag." It has been maliciously added that mention of his name is also like flaunting a red flag in the sight of a considerable proportion of the assembly, for Björnson has always been a fighter as well as an artist, and it has been his self-imposed mission to arouse his fellow countrymen from their mental sluggishness no less than to give creative embodiment to their types of character and their ideal aspirations. But whatever the opposition aroused by his political and social radicalism, even his opponents have been constrained to feel that he was the mouthpiece of their race as no other Norwegian before him had been, and that he has voiced whatever is deepest and most enduring in the Norwegian temper. Powerful as has been his appeal to the intellect and conscience of the modern world at large, it has always had a special note of admonition or of cheer for his own people. With reference to the second of our two themes, it is sufficient to say that, although the form of verse was almost wholly abandoned by him during the latter half of his life, the breath of poetry never ceased to exhale from his work, and the lyric exuberance of his later prose still recalls to us the singer of the sixties.

Few productions of modern literature have proved as epoch-making as the modest little volume called "Synnöve Solbakken," which appeared in the book shops of Christiania and Copenhagen in 1857. It was a simple tale of peasant life, an idyl of the love of a boy and a girl, but it was absolutely new in its style, and in its intimate revelation of the Norwegian character. It must be remembered that until the year 1814, Norway had for centuries been politically united with Denmark, and that Copenhagen had been the common literary centre of the two countries. To that city Norwegian writers had gravitated as naturally as French writers gravitate to Paris. There had resulted from this

condition of things a literature which, although it owed much to men of Norwegian birth, was essentially a Danish literature, and must properly be so styled. That literature could boast, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, an interesting history comparable in its antiquity with the greater literatures of Europe, and a brilliant history for at least a hundred years past. But old literatures are sure to become more or less sophisticated and trammelled by tradition, and to this rule Danish literature was no exception. When the constitution of Eidsvold, in 1814, separated Norway from Denmark, and made it into an independent kingdom (save for the forced Swedish partnership), the country had practically no literary tradition save that which centred about the Danish capital. She might claim to have been the native country of many Danish writers, even of Ludvig Holberg, the greatest writer that the Scandinavian peoples have yet produced, but she could point to nothing that might fairly be called a Norwegian literature. The young men of the rising generation were naturally much concerned about this, and a sharp divergence of opinion arose as to the means whereby the interests of Norwegian literature might be furthered, and the aims which it should have in view. One party urged that the literature should break loose from its traditional past, and aim at the cultivation of an exclusively national spirit. The other party declared such a course to be folly, contending that literature must be a product of gradual development rather than of set volition, and that, despite the shifting of the political kaleidoscope, the national literature was so firmly rooted in its Danish past that its natural evolution must be an outgrowth from all that had gone before.

Each of these parties found a vigorous leader, the cause of ultra-Norwegianism being championed by Wergeland, an erratic person in whom the spark of genius burned, but who never found himself, artistically speaking. The champion of

the conservatives was Welhaven, a polished writer of singular charm and much force, philosophical in temper, whose graceful verse and acute criticism upheld by both precept and practice the traditional standards of culture. Each of these men had his followers, who proved in many cases more zealous than their leaders. The period of the thirties and forties was dominated by this Wergeland-Welhaven controversy, which engendered much bitterness of feeling, and which constitutes the capital fact in Norwegian literary history before the appearance of Ibsen and Björnson upon the scene. A sort of parallel might be drawn for American readers by taking two such men as Whitman and Longfellow, opposing them to one another in the most outspoken fashion, assuming for both a sharply polemic manner, and ranging among their respective followers all the other writers of their time. Then imagine the issue between them to be drawn not only in the field of letters, but also in the pulpit, the theatre, and the political arena, and some slight notion may be obtained of the condition of affairs which preceded the advent of Björnson and the true birth of Norwegian literature with "Synnöve Solbakken."

The work which was thus destined to mark the opening of a new era in Norwegian letters was written in the twenty-fifth year of its author's life. The son of a country pastor, Björnstjerne Björnson was born at Kvikne, December 8, 1832. At the age of six, his father was transferred to a new parish in the Romsdal, one of the most picturesque regions in Norway. The impression made upon his sensitive nature by these surroundings was deep and enduring. Looking back upon his boyhood he speaks with strong emotion of the evenings when "I stood and watched the sunlight play upon mountain and fiord, until I wept, as if I had done something wrong, and when, borne down upon my ski into one valley or another I could stand as if spellbound by a beauty, by a

longing that I could not explain, but that was so great that along with the highest joy I had, also, the deepest sense of imprisonment and sorrow." This is the mood which was to be given utterance in that wonderful lyric, "Over the Lofty Mountains," in which all the ardor and the longings of passionate and impatient youth find the most appealing expression. The song is found in "Arne," and may be thus reproduced, after a fashion, in the English language.

"Often I wonder what there may be

Over the lofty mountains.

Here the snow is all I see,

Spread at the foot of the dark green tree;

Sadly I often ponder,

Would I were over yonder.

"Strong of wing soars the eagle high

Over the lofty mountains,

Glad of the new day soars to the sky,

Wild in pursuit of his prey doth fly;

Pauses, and, fearless of danger,

Scans the far coasts of the stranger.

"The apple-tree, whose thoughts ne'er fly

Over the lofty mountains,

Leaves, when the summer days draw nigh,

Patiently waits for the time when high

*The birds in its boughs shall be swinging,
Yet will know not what they are singing.
"He who has yearned so long to go
Over the lofty mountains—
He whose visions and fond hopes grow
Dim, with the years that so restless flow—
Knows what the birds are singing,
Glad in the tree-tops swinging.
"Why, oh bird, dost thou hither fare
Over the lofty mountains?
Surely it must be better there,
Broader the view and freer the air;
Com'st thou these longings to bring me;
These only, and nothing to wing me?
"Oh, shall I never, never go
Over the lofty mountains!
Must all my thoughts and wishes so
Held in these walls of ice and snow
Here be imprisoned forever?
Till death shall I flee them never?
"Hence! I will hence! Oh, so far from here,
Over the lofty mountains!*

*Here 't is so dull, so unspeakably drear;
Young is my heart and free from fear—
Better the walls to be scaling
Than here in my prison lie wailing.
"One day, I know, shall my soul free roam
Over the lofty mountains.
Oh, my God, fair is thy home,
Ajar is the door for all who come;
Guard it for me yet longer,
Till my soul through striving grows stronger."*

At the age of eleven Björnson's school days began at Molde, and were continued at Christiania in a famous preparatory school, where he had Ibsen for a comrade. He entered the university in his twentieth year, but his career was not brilliant from a scholastic point of view, and he was too much occupied with his own intellectual concerns to be a model student. From his matriculation in 1852, to the appearance of his first book in 1857, he was occupied with many sorts of literary experiments, and became actively engaged in journalism. The theatre, in particular, attracted him, for the theatre was one of the chief foci of the intellectual life of his country (as it should be in every country), and he plunged into dramatic criticism as the avowed partisan of Norwegian ideals, holding himself, in some sort, the successor of Wergeland, Who had died about ten years earlier. Before becoming a dramatic critic, he had essayed dramatic authorship, and the acceptance by the theatre of his juvenile play, "Valborg," had led to a somewhat unusual result. He was given a free ticket of

admission, and a few weeks of theatre-going opened his eyes to the defects of his own accepted work, which he withdrew before it had been inflicted upon the public. The full consciousness of his poetical calling came to him upon his return from a student gathering at the university town of Upsala, whither he had gone as a special correspondent. "When I came home from the journey," he says, "I slept three whole days with a few brief intervals for eating and conversation. Then I wrote down my impressions of the journey, but just because I had first lived and then written, the account got style and color; it attracted attention, and made me all the more certain that the hour had come. I packed up, went home, thought it all over, wrote and rewrote 'Between the Battles' in a fortnight, and travelled to Copenhagen with the completed piece in my trunk; I would be a poet." He then set to writing "Synnöve Solbakken," published it in part as a newspaper serial, and then in book form, in the autumn of 1857. He had "commenced author" in good earnest.

The next fifteen years of Björnson's life were richly productive. Within a single year he had published "Arne," the second of his peasant idyls and perhaps the most remarkable of them all, and had also published two brief dramas, "Halte-Hulda" and the one already mentioned as the achievement of fourteen feverish days. The remaining product of the fifteen years includes two more prose idyls, "A Happy Boy" and "The Fisher Maiden" (with a considerable number of small pieces similar in character); three more plays drawn from the treasury of old Norse history, "King Sverre," "Sigurd Slembe," and "Sigurd Jorsalfar"; a dramatic setting of the story of "Mary Stuart in Scotland"; a little social comedy, "The Newly Married Couple," which offers a foretaste of his later exclusive preoccupation with modern life; "Arnljot Gelline," his only long poem, a wild narrative of the clash between heathendom and the Christian faith in

the days of Olaf the Holy; and, last but by no means least, the collection of his "Poems and Songs." Thus at the age of forty, Björnson found himself with a dozen books to his credit books which had stirred his fellow countrymen as no other books had ever stirred them, arousing them to the full consciousness of their own nature and of its roots in their own heroic past. He had become the voice of his people as no one had been before him, the singer of all that was noble in Norwegian aspiration, the sympathetic delineator of all that was essential in Norwegian Character. He had, in short, created a national literature where none had before existed, and he was still in his early prime.

The collected edition of Björnson's "Tales," published in 1872, together with "The Bridal March," separately published in the following year, gives us a complete representation of that phase of his genius which is best known to the world at large. Here are five stories of considerable length, and a number of slighter sketches, in which the Norwegian peasant is portrayed with intimate and loving knowledge. The peasant tale was no new thing in European literature, for the names of Auerbach and George Sand, to say nothing of many others, at once come to the mind. In Scandinavian literature, its chief representative had been the Danish novelist, Blicher, who had written with insight and charm of the peasantry of Jutland. But in the treatment of peasant life by most of Björnson's predecessors there had been too much of the *de haut en bas* attitude; the peasant had been drawn from the outside, viewed philosophically, and invested with artificial sentiment. Björnson was too near to his own country folk to commit such faults as these; he was himself of peasant stock, and all his boyhood life had been spent in close association with men who wrested a scanty living from an ungrateful soil. Although a poet by instinct, he was not afraid of realism, and did not shrink from giving the brutal

aspects of peasant life a place upon his canvas. In emphasizing the characteristics of reticence and *naïveté* he really discovered the Norwegian peasant for literary purposes. Beneath the words spoken by his characters we are constantly made to realize that there are depths of feeling that remain unexpressed; whether from native pride or from a sense of the inadequacy of mere words to set forth a critical moment of life, his men and women are distinguished by the most laconic utterance, yet their speech always has dramatic fitness and bears the stamp of sincerity. Jaeger speaks of the manifold possibilities of this laconic method in the following words:—

"It is as if the author purposely set in motion the reader's fancy and feeling that they might do their own work. The greatest poet is he who understands how to awaken fancy and feeling to their highest degree of self-activity. And this is Björnson's greatness in his peasant novels, that he has poured from his horn of plenty a wealth of situations and motives that hold the reader's mind and burn themselves into it, that become his personal possession just because the author has known how to suggest so much in so few words."

In some respects, the little sketch called "The Father" is the supreme example of Björnson's artistry in this kind. There are only a few pages in all, but they embody the tragedy of a lifetime. The little work is a literary gem of the purest water, and it reveals the whole secret of the author's genius, as displayed in his early tales. It is by these tales of peasant life that Björnson is best known outside of his own country; one may almost say that it is by them alone that he is really familiar to English readers. A free translation of "Synnöve Solbakken" was made as early as 1858, by Mary Howitt, and published under the title of "Trust and Trial." Translations of the other tales were made soon after their original

appearance, and in some instances have been multiplied. It is thus a noteworthy fact that Björnson, although four years the junior of Ibsen, enjoyed a vogue among English readers for a score of years during which the name of Ibsen was absolutely unknown to them. The whirligig of time has brought in its revenges of late years, and the long neglected older author has had more than the proportional share of our attention than is fairly his due.

In his delineation of the Norwegian peasant character, Björnson was greatly aided by the study of the sagas, which he had read with enthusiasm from his earliest boyhood. Upon them his style was largely formed, and their vivid dramatic representation of the life of the early Norsemen impressed him profoundly, shaping both his ideals and the form of their expression. The modern Scandinavian may well be envied for his literary inheritance from the heroic past. No other European has anything to compare with it for clean-cut vigor and wealth of romantic material. The literature which blossomed in Iceland and flourished for two or three centuries wherever Norsemen made homes for themselves offers a unique intellectual phenomenon, for nothing like their record remains to us from any other primitive people. This

"Tale of the Northland of old

And the undying glory of dreams,"

proved a lasting stimulus to Björnson's genius, and, during the early period of his career, which is now under review, it made its influence felt alike in his tales, his dramas, and his songs. "To see the peasant in the light of the sagas and the sagas in the light of the peasant" he declared to be the fundamental principle of his literary method.

It has been seen that during the fifteen years which made Björnson in so peculiar a sense the spokesman of his race, he wrote no less than five saga dramas. The first two of these works, "Between the Battles" and "Halte-Hulda," are rather slight performances, and the third, "King Sverre," although a more extended work, is not particularly noteworthy. The grimness of the Viking life is softened by romantic coloring, and the poet has not freed himself from the influence of Oehlenschlaeger. But in "Sigurd Slembe" he found a subject entirely worthy of his genius, and produced one of the noblest masterpieces of all modern literature. This largely planned and magnificently executed dramatic trilogy was written in Munich, and published in 1862. The material is found in the "Heimskringla," but the author has used the prerogative of the artist to simplify the historical outline thus offered into a superb imaginative creation, rich in human interest, and powerful in dramatic presentation. The story is concerned with the efforts of Sigurd, nicknamed "Slembe," to obtain the succession to the throne of Norway during the first half of the twelfth century. He was a son of King Magnus Barfod, and, although of illegitimate birth, might legally make this claim. The secret of his birth has been kept from him until he has come to manhood, and the revelation of this secret by his mother is made in the first section of the trilogy, which is a single act, written in blank verse. Recognizing the futility of urging his birthright at this time, he starts off to win fame as a crusader, the sort of fame that haloed Sigurd Jorsalfar, then king of Norway. The remainder of the work is in prose, and was, in fact, written before this poetical prologue. The second section, in three acts, deals with an episode in the Orkneys, five years later. Sigurd has not even then journeyed to the Holy Land, but he has wandered elsewhere afar, thwarted ambition and the sense of injustice ever gnawing at his heart. He becomes entangled in a feudal quarrel concerning the rule of the islands. Both parties seek to use him for their purposes, but

in the end, although leadership is in his grasp, he tears himself away, appalled by the revelation of crime and treachery in his surroundings. In this section of the work we have the subtly conceived and Hamlet-like figure of Earl Harald, in whose interest Frakark, a Norse Lady Macbeth, plots the murder of Earl Paul, only to bring upon Harald himself the terrible death that she has planned for his brother. Here, also, we have the gracious maiden figure of Audhild, perhaps the loveliest of all Björnson's delineations of womanhood, a figure worthy to be ranked with the heroines of Shakespeare and Goethe, who remains sweet and fragrant in our memory forever after. With the mutual love of Sigurd and Audhild comes the one hour of sunshine in both their lives, but the love is destined to end in a noble renunciation and to leave only a hallowed memory in token of its brief existence.

Ten more years as a crusader and a wanderer over the face of the earth pass by before we meet with Sigurd again in the third section of the trilogy. But his resolution is taken. He has returned to his native land, and will claim his own. The land is now ruled by Harald Gille, who is, like Sigurd Slembe, an illegitimate son of Magnus Barfod, and who, during the last senile years of Sigurd Jorsalfar's life, had won the recognition that Sigurd Slembe might have won had he not missed the chance, and been acknowledged as the king's brother. When the king died, he left a son named Magnus, who should have been his successor, but whom Harald Gille seized, blinded, and imprisoned that he might himself occupy the throne. The five acts of this third section of the trilogy cover the last two years of Sigurd Slembe's life, years during which he seeks to gain his end, first by conciliation, and afterwards, maddened by the base treachery of the king and his followers, by assassination and violence. He has become a hard man, but, however wild his schemes of revenge, and however desperate his measures, he retains

our sympathy to the end because we feel that circumstances have made him the ravager of his country, and that his underlying motive all along has not been a merely personal ambition, but an immense longing to serve his people, and to rule them with justice and wisdom. The final scene of all has a strange and solemn beauty. It is on the eve of the battle in which Sigurd is to be captured and put to death by his enemies. The actual manner of his death was too horrible even for the purposes of tragedy; and the poet has chosen the better part in ending the play with a foreshadowing of the outcome. Sigurd has made his last stand, his Danish allies have deserted him, and he well knows what will be the next day's issue. And here we have one of the noblest illustrations in all literature of that *Versöhnung* which is the last word of tragic art. For in this supreme hour the peace of mind which he has sought for so many years comes to him when least expected, and all the tempests of life are stilled. That reconciliation which the hour of approaching death brings to men whose lives have been set at tragic pitch, has come to him also; he now sees that this was the inevitable end, and the recognition of the fitness with which events have shaped themselves brings with it an exaltation of soul in which life is seen revealed in its true aspect. No longer veiled in the mists which have hitherto hidden it from his passionate gaze, he takes note of what it really is, and casts it from him. In this hour of passionless contemplation such a renunciation is not a thing torn from the reluctant soul, but the clear solution, so long sought, of the problem so long blindly attempted. That which his passion enslaved self has so struggled to avert, his higher self, at last set free, calmly and gladly accepts.

"What miracle is this? for in the hour I prayed, the prayer was granted! Peace, perfect peace! Then I will go to-morrow

to my last battle as to the altar; peace shall at last be mine for all my longings.

"How this autumn evening brings reconciliation to my soul! Sun and wave and shore and sea flow all together, as in the thought of God all others; never yet has it seemed so fair to me. But it is not mine to rule over this lovely land. How greatly I have done it ill! But how has it all so come to pass? for in my wanderings I saw thy mountains in every sky, I yearned for home as a child longs for Christmas, yet I came no sooner, and when at last I came, I gave thee wound upon wound.

"But now, in contemplative mood, thou gazest upon me, and givest me at parting this fairest autumn night of thine; I will ascend yonder rock and take a long farewell."

The action of "Sigurd Slembe," is interspersed with several lyrics, the most striking of which is here translated in exact reproduction of the original form:

"Sin and Death, at break of day,

Day, day,

Spoke together with bated breath;

'Marry thee, sister, that I may stay,

Stay, stay,

In thy house,' quoth Death.

"Death laughed aloud when Sin was wed,

Wed, wed,

And danced on the bridal day:

But bore that night from the bridal bed,

*Bed, bed,
The groom in a shroud away.
"Death came to her sister at break of day,
Day, day,
And Sin drew a weary breath;
'He whom thou lovest is mine for aye,
Aye, aye,
Mine he is,' quoth Death."*

One more saga drama was to be written by Björnson, but "Sigurd Slembe" remains his greatest achievement in this field of activity. Its single successor, "Sigurd Jorsalfar," was not published until ten years later, and may not be compared with it for either strength or poetic inspiration. The author called it a "folkplay," and announced the intention, which was never fulfilled, of making several similar experiments with scenes from the sagas, "which should appeal to every eye and every stage of culture, to each in its own way, and at the performance of which all, for the time being, would experience the joy of fellow feeling." The experiment proves interesting, and is carried out without didacticism or straining after sensational effects; the play is vigorous and well planned, but for the reader it has little of the dramatic impressiveness of its predecessor, although as an acting drama it is better fitted for the requirements of the stage.

The two volumes which contain the greater part of Björnson's poetry not dramatic in form were both published in 1870. One of them was the collection of his "Poems and Songs," the other was the epic cycle, "Arnljot Gelline," the

only long poem that he has written. The volume of lyrics includes many pieces of imperfect quality and slight value, —personal tributes and occasional productions,—but it includes also those national songs that every Norwegian knows by heart, that are sung upon all national occasions by the author's friends and foes alike, and that have made him the greatest of Norway's lyric poets. No translation can ever quite reproduce their cadence or their feeling; they illustrate the one aspect of Björnson's many-sided genius that must be taken on trust by those who cannot read his language. A friend once asked him upon what occasion he had felt most fully the joy of being a poet. His reply was as follows:—

"It was when a party from the Right in Christiania came to my house and smashed all my windows. For when they had finished their assault, and were starting home again, they felt that they had to sing something, and so they began to sing, 'Yes, we love this land of ours'—they couldn't help it. They had to sing the song of the man they had attacked."

Into this collection were gathered the lyrics scattered through the peasant tales and the saga dramas, thus making it completely representative of his quality as a singer. A revised and somewhat extended edition of this volume was published about ten years later. Björnson has had the rare fortune of having his lyrics set to music by three composers—Nordraak, Kjerulf, and Grieg—as intensely national in spirit as himself, and no festal occasion among Norwegians is celebrated without singing the national hymn, "Yes, We Love This Land of Ours," or the noble choral setting of "Olaf Trygvason." The best folk-singer is he who stands in the whirling round of life, says the poet, and he reveals the very secret of his power when he tells us that life was ever more to him than song, and that existence, where it was worth while, in the thick of the human fray, always had for him a deeper meaning than anything he had written. The

longest poem in Björnson's collection is called "Bergliot," and is a dramatic monologue in which the foul slaying of her husband Einar Tambarskelve and their son Eindríde is mourned by the bereaved wife and mother. The story is from the saga of Harald Haardraada, and is treated with the deepest tragic impressiveness.

"Odin in Valhal I dare not seek

For him I forsook in my childhood.

And the new God in Gimle?

He took all that I had!

Revenge:—Who says revenge?—

Can revenge awaken my dead

Or shelter me from the cold?

Has it comfort for a widow's home

Or for a childless mother?

Away with your revenge: Let be!

Lay him on the litter, him and the son.

Come, we will follow them home.

The new God in Gimle, the terrible, who took all,

Let him also take revenge, for he understands it!

Drive slowly: Thus drove Einar ever;

—Soon enough shall we reach home."

It was also to the "Heimskringla" that Björnson turned for the subject of his epic cycle, "Arnljót Gellir." Here we read

in various rhythms of Arnljot the outlaw, how the hands of all men are against him; how he offers to stay his wrath and end the blood feud if the fair Ingigerd, Trand's daughter, may be bestowed upon him; how, being refused, he sets fire to Trand's house and bears Ingigerd away captive; how her tears prevail upon him to release her, and how she seeks refuge in a southern cloister; how Arnljot wanders restless over sea and land until he comes to King Olaf, on the eve of the great battle, receives the Christian faith, fights fiercely in the vanguard against the hosts of the heathen, and, smiling, falls with his king on the field of Stiklestad. One song from this cycle, "The Cloister in the South" is here reproduced in an exact copy of the original metre, in the hope that even this imperfect representation of the poem may be better than none at all.

"Who would enter so late the cloister in?"

"A maid forlorn from the land of snow."

"What sorrow is thine, and what thy sin?"

"The deepest sorrow the heart can know.

I have nothing done

Yet must still endeavor,

Though my strength be none,

To wander ever.

Let me in, to seek for my pain surcease,

I can find no peace."

"From what far-off land hast thou taken flight?"

"From the land of the North, a weary way."

"What stayed thy feet at our gate this night?"

"The chant of the nuns, for I heard them pray,

And the song gave peace

To my soul, and blessed me;

It offered release

From the grief that oppressed me.

Let me in, so if peace to give be thine,

I may make it mine."

"Name me the grief that thy life hath crossed."

"Rest may I never, never know."

"Thy father, thy lover, thou hast then lost?"

"I lost them both at a single blow,

And all I held dear

In my deepest affection;

Aye, all that was near

To my heart's recollection.

Let me in, I am failing, I beg, I implore,

I can bear no more."

"How was it that thou thy father lost?"

"He was slain, and I saw the deed."

"How was it that thou thy lover lost?"

"My father he slew, and I saw the deed."

*I wept so bitterly
When he roughly would woo me,
He at last set me free,
And forbore to pursue me.
Let me in, for the horror my soul doth fill.
That I love him still."*

Chorus of nuns within the Church.

*"Come child, come bride,
To God's own side,
From grief find rest
On Jesus' breast.
Rest thy burden of sorrow.
On Horeb's height;
Like the lark, with to-morrow
Shall thy soul take flight.
Here stilled is all yearning,
No passion returning;
No terror come near thee
When the Saviour can hear thee.
For He, if in need be
Thy storm-beaten soul,
Though it bruised as a reed be,*

Shall raise it up whole."

Despite the power and beauty of an occasional manifestation of his genius during the late sixties and early seventies, the poetic impulse that had made Björnson the most famous of Norwegian authors seemed, toward the close of the fifteen-year period just now under review, to be well nigh exhausted. Even among those who had followed his career most closely there were few who could anticipate the splendid new outburst of activity for which he was preparing. These years seemed to be a dead time, not only in Björnson's life, but also in the general intellectual life of the Scandinavian countries. Dr. Brandes thus describes the feelings of a thoughtful observer during that period of stagnation. "In the North one had the feeling of being shut off from the intellectual life of the time. We were sitting with closed doors, a few brains struggling fruitlessly with the problem of how to get them opened... With whole schools of foreign literature the cultivated Dane had almost no acquaintance; and when, finally, as a consequence of political animosity, intellectual intercourse with Germany was broken off, the main channel was closed through which the intellectual developments of the day had been communicated to Norway as well as Denmark. French influence was dreaded as immoral, and there was but little understanding of either the English language or spirit." But an intellectual renaissance was at hand, an intellectual reawakening with a cosmopolitan outlook, and, Björnson was destined to become its leader, much as he had been the leader of the national movement of an earlier decade. During these years of seeming inactivity, comparatively speaking, he had read and thought much, and the new thought of the age had fecundated his mind. Historical and religious criticism, educational and social problems, had taken possession of his thought, and the philosophy of evolution had transformed the whole tenor of his ideas,

shaping them to, deeper issues and more practical purposes than had hitherto engaged them. He had read widely and variously in Darwin, Spencer, Mill, Müller, and Taine; he had, in short, scaled the "lofty mountains" that had so hemmed in his early view, and made his way into the intellectual kingdoms of the modern world that lay beyond. The *Weltgeist* had appealed to him with its irresistible behest, just as it appealed at about the same time to Ibsen and Tolstoy and Ruskin, and had made him a man of new interests and ideals.

One might have found foreshadowings of this transformation in certain of his earlier works,—in "The Newly Married Couple," for example, with its delicate analysis, of a common domestic relation, or in "The Fisher Maiden," with its touch of modernity,—but from these suggestions one could hardly have prophesied the enthusiasm and the genial force with which Björnson was to project his personality into the controversial arena of modern life. The series of works which have come from his pen during the past thirty-five years have dealt with most of the graver problems which concern society as a whole,—politics, religion, education, the status of women, the license of the press, the demand of the socialist for a reconstruction of the old order. They have also dealt with many of the delicate questions of individual ethics,—the relations of husband and wife, of parent and child, the responsibility of the merchant to his creditors and of the employer to his dependants, the double standard of morality for men and women, and the duty devolving upon both to transmit a vigorous strain to their offspring. These are some of the themes that have engaged the novelist and dramatist; they have also engaged the public speaker and lay preacher of enlightenment, as well as themes of a more strictly political character, such as the separation of Norway from the Dual Monarchy, the renewal of the ancient bond between Norway

and Iceland, the free development of parliamentary government, the cause of Pangermanism, and the furtherance of peace between the nations. An extensive programme, surely, even in this summary enumeration of its more salient features, but one to which his capacity has not proved unequal, and which he has carried out by the force of his immense energy and superabundant vitality. The burden of all this tendencious matter has caused his art to suffer at times, no doubt, but his inspiration has retained throughout much of the marvellous freshness of the earlier years, and the genius of the poet still flashes upon us from a prosaic environment, sometimes in a lovely lyric, more frequently, however, in the turn of a phrase or the psychological envisagement of some supreme moment in the action of the story or the drama.

The great transformation in Björnson's literary manner and choice of subjects was marked by his sending home from abroad, in the season of 1874-75, two plays, "The Editor" and "A Bankruptcy." It was two years later that Ibsen sent home from abroad "The Pillars of Society," which marked a similar turning point in his artistic career. It is a curious coincidence that the plays of modern life produced during this second period by these two men are the same in number, an even dozen in each case. Besides the two above named, these modern plays of Björnson are, with their dates, the following: "The King" (1877), "Leonarda" (1879), "The New System" (1879), "A Glove" (1883), "Beyond the Strength I." (1883), "Geography and Love" (1885), "Beyond the Strength II." (1895), "Paul Lange and Tora Parsberg" (1898), "Laboremus" (1901), and "At Storhove" (1902). Since the cessation of Ibsen's activity, Björnson has outrun him in the race, adding "Daglannet" (1904), and "When the New Wine Blooms" (1909) to the list above given. Besides these fourteen plays, however, he has published seven important volumes of prose fiction during the last thirty-five

years. The titles and dates are as follows: "Magnhild" (1877), "Captain Mansana" (1879), "Dust" (1882), "Flags Are Flying in City and Harbor" (1884), "In God's Ways," (1889), "New Tales" (1894), (of which collection "Absalom's Hair" is the longest and most important), and "Mary" (1906). The achievement represented by this list is all the more extraordinary when we consider the fact that for the greater part of the thirty-five years which these plays and novels cover, their author has been, both as a public speaker and as a writer for the periodical press, an active participant in the political and social life of his country.

Most of these books must be dismissed with a few words in order that our remaining space may be given to the four or five that are of the greatest power and significance. "The Editor," the first of the modern plays, offers a fierce satire upon modern journalism, its dishonesty, its corrupt and malicious power, its personal and partisan prejudice. The character of the editor in this play was unmistakably drawn, in its leading characteristics, from the figure of a well known conservative journalist in Christiania, although Björnson vigorously maintained that the protraiture was typical rather than personal.

"In various other countries than my own, I have observed the type of journalist who is here depicted. It is characterized by acting upon a basis of sheer egotism, passionate and boundless, and by terrorism in such fashion that it frightens honest people away from every liberal movement, and visits upon the individual an unscrupulous persecution."

This play was not particularly successful upon the stage, but the book was widely read, and occasioned much excited personal controversy. "A Bankruptcy," on the other hand, proved a brilliant stage success. Its matter was less contentious, and its technical execution was effective and