“NORWAY’S BEATING HEART”: BJÖRNSON, THE GUARDIAN OF HIS COUNTRY: BY HANNA ASTRUP LARSEN

Not far from Björnstjerne Björnson’s home, near one of the roads that wind through his beloved Gudbrandsdalen, there is a great rock face. Hung high above the road, it flashes upon the traveler with startling vividness, for the face is that of Björnson himself. Jutting rocks form the strong, keen profile; underneath the bushy eyebrows one might almost fancy the eyes gleaming. Above the face trees form the mane of hair and the familiar cap that Björnson wore when at home. Norwegians call the face “the Guardian.”

So should Björnson’s face be limned. He was a man hewn out of the rocks of his native country with the sparkle of its rushing waters and the music of its dark soughing pines in his soul. Like the face in the mountain he towers above his people and is yet one of them, their guardian for half a century.

It is said of Björnson that whenever he entered an assembly where there was a high seat he took it instinctively. In his early youth he felt in himself the power to become a chief among his people, and almost as early he realized that when greatness came to him it would come through liberating and drawing to the light those who were poor and obscure and lowly in the community. As a boy in school he organized the little boys to lick the big bullies. By this boyish prank he caught in his hand the blood-red thread of heart-fellowship with the weak which was to run through all the beautiful, varied web of his life.

Long before his death Björnson was known as “Norway’s uncrowned king.” Equally true is his other familiar title, “Norway’s beating heart.” He gained his kingship not by being aloof from the people, but by being one with them, living their life, sharing their struggles, thinking their thoughts. Few men have given out so much in love and service; few have received so much. He once said in amused triumph that however much his countrymen might revile him they could not do without him. As an instance he mentioned that some political opponents had broken his windows and departed singing the national anthem of which Björnson was himself the author.

There is in Norway a peasant aristocracy, many members of which can trace their lineage back to the great men of the sagas. Some of the saga simplicity is still in their thought, its brevity and pithiness in their speech. Such a peasant is as proudly exclusive as
any nobleman and has as strong a sense of personal dignity. He will extend the hand of fellowship to a king without being abashed.

It was from such people that Björnson sprang. His mother was of an artist family, a relative of the composer Nordraak, but a branch of her house traced its descent to the old Norse kings before the accession of a foreign dynasty. Björnson was very proud of this fact. His father was of peasant origin and had been a farmer before studying for the ministry, but counted among his ancestors one of the peasant poets whose songs at weddings and christenings became the tradition of a whole valley.

In his father’s country parish Björnson as a boy gained an intimate knowledge of the peasants. His reputation as a fighter and a teller of stories is still fresh in the district. His first literary success came—not after long years of waiting as it did to Ibsen—but early and with one stroke. It came with his first idyl of peasant life. In it he touched an absolutely unworn string, and it gave a music so sweet, so tender and fresh that it caressed the ear, and yet so keen, so pungent that it came again and again insistently until its lesson was driven home.

It opened the eyes of the upper classes, still living on the remains of a foreign culture, to the treasures of their own national life. He showed the romanticists, still enamored of French Arcadian shepherdesses, the finer, purer idyls of their own peasant boys and girls. But he did more than that. He roused the peasants to a sense of their own value. He borrowed the saga style with its terseness and reserve, and by using it in his treatment of the present-day peasants he seemed to link them to that glorious past of which they were in fact the lineal heirs. Its effect in the nationalization of his country can hardly be measured in this generation.

In one of his early stories, “Arne,” he describes a young peasant poet who longs for the larger life beyond the mountains, but at last finds his happiness and his life-work among his own people in the valley. It was in fact Björnson’s own story at a certain period of his life. His happy marriage helped to bind his restless spirit down to sober work among real people.

The chieftain spirit in him could not be satisfied with any mere literary activity. As a student in the university he became active in the first labor agitation of the country and narrowly escaped jail. He led an army of six hundred students to hiss from the boards the Danish language that still dominated the Norwegian stage. It was one of his most spectacular battles to overthrow the bushel of foreign culture that hid the national life, and it was successful.
The conservative element which had approved, when the young writer used the peasants as literary material, was startled when he demanded that these same peasants should be heard in the councils of the young nation. When he had joined the new liberal political movement his house was shunned by all but two or three of the friends of his own class, among them Edvard Grieg, but it was a gathering-place for the peasants that came to Christiania.

At this time he realized his wish to found a permanent home. He was able to buy an old historic farm in one of the broad, fertile valleys of southern Norway. He resurrected its old name and became known in the peasant nomenclature with the name of his farm as "Father Aulestad" or simply "the Aulestad."

It was one of his beliefs that every man should own a bit of the earth. He wanted to work in conjunction with the sun and rain and the growing forces of nature. That was the only way, he said, to preserve a healthy outlook on life. So he built roads and fences and reclaimed waste land in the same spirit in which he opened new channels for thought and tore down time-honored prejudices.

The Aulestad farm gave full play to his primeval instinct for conquering the earth. Strangers traveling in Norway often say that the rocks piled high at the edge of every field give the clue to the toughness of the Norwegian character. Björnson’s farm was fertile, but it was of the kind that seems to "sweat rocks"; the ground cleared one year would be full the next year of stones that seemed to work their way out from the bowels of the earth.

The old low-beamed living house at Aulestad was preserved with its tiled roof and carved, unpainted wood. As time went on, it became filled with pictures and statues, hammered silver and fine hand-woven tapestries, most of them the gifts of the artists or perhaps bought to help some struggling genius. Björnson himself added the great historic veranda that became the family summer sitting room, where Björnson stood on state occasions to receive his guests. From it in nineteen hundred and five, he, the private citizen who had never held office, received the homage of twenty thousand troops marching to guard their country.

In front of the veranda were eight flagpoles, where he was fond of hoisting the flags of all nations as a symbol of universal peace. His Norwegian flag was always floating on the breeze, the largest flag in Norway, it is said. He would tolerate no artificial landscape gardening, but his lane of birches, the great Norwegian birches with light feathery branches drooping low and sweeping white, gray-knotted trunks, is famous.
BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSON, PHILOSOPHER-PROFESSOR, REFORMER: KNOWN THROUGHOUT HIS OWN LAND AS “NORWAY’S BEATING HEART.”
TWO SCENES OF FARM LIFE
ON THE AULESTAD ESTATE.
BJÖRNSON IN FRONT OF THE HOUSE AT AULESTAD FEEDING HIS FAVORITE HORSE "MATER."
“NORWAY'S BEATING HEART”

“Father Aulestad” aimed to make his farm the model for the country. He was proud of the fact that his stock grew from a small beginning to sixty-three head of cattle and eleven horses, though, by the way, none of the latter was ever available when he wanted them; they were always busy bringing guests to or from the station. He was proud when his bulls and stallions won blue ribbons at the country fair and most proud of all because he owned the only private electric light plant in Norway. He loved to turn on the current in the great arc lights and flood the place with light to welcome a guest or celebrate a holiday.

The animals on the place were his especial care, and no one else was allowed to touch the dish of salt he kept for the horses or the basket of broken food from which he scattered every day to the birds. Sometimes he came to grief, as when he tried to show by his example that a certain obstreperous goat needed only kindness to bring out its true nature, and the goat repaid him after the manner of goats by working his downfall just as he was sedately leaving the enclosure. He wrote in the newspapers begging people to leave the grass along the roads for passing cattle and urging an organized effort for the extinction of the gadfly.

Barefoot philosophy with a rope around its waist had no appeal for Björnson. He was too wholesome for mawkish sentimentality, and an exquisite personal neatness was a part of his beauty-cult. A spot on the clothing of the person who was talking to him was enough to obscure his vision of that person’s spiritual graces. His craving for beauty bent everything about him to its own imperative need, and it is said that even the most commonplace servant could not stay long in his house without becoming actually beautified by the spirit that emanated from him.

Brought up in a frugal generation, he had the unjaded senses of a child. Though very abstemious, he was fond of champagne, and once he was heard to say, as he held up to the light a tiny glassful and watched its yellow sparkle, that he wished he could afford to drink it every day. This was at a time when he was making a fortune on his books and giving away thousands of crowns every year.

Almost as soon as he had settled at Aulestad, Björnson began to let his tenants acquire land on easy terms. He wanted to carry out his theory that every man should own ground. He established a bank for his tenants where they could borrow money at two per cent. interest with long terms of payment. Servants stayed with him sometimes for thirty years. Once he had noticed that one of the old servants looked glum and wondered what he could do about it. He decided on a
present of a hundred crowns and was very much hurt because the man did not thank him. When at last he came, Bjørnson could not help saying, "You were a long time about it." "I couldn't," said the man. It had taken him three days to recover the unruffled expression which the Norwegian peasant thinks is the only exterior to present to the world. Another time he tried a particularly surly maid with a similar present "just to see if he couldn't make her smile."

The movement for establishing people's high-schools began about the time when Bjørnson acquired Aulestad. He gave a portion of his ground for such a school. The house was built in the old Norwegian style with a long table and benches. The huge fireplace was piled high with fat pine sticks, which made an illumination whenever Bjørnson came. Then the large hall was decked with flags, the lamps lit, the long tables laid. The pupils of the school gathered, and sometimes so many of the neighboring peasants came in that the house was full. Bjørnson was never more brilliant. He started songs and told stories of the great European world, of books, theaters, festivals and historic places, acting out what he told, flashing with wit, radiating enthusiasm. In the summer the meetings were held in the court outside. These were often turned into political debates, and it was Bjørnson who hurled about thoughts like burning torches, kindling flames here and there in the mass of peasant stolidity.

He needed to feel about him always the close warm touch of his fellowmen. At one anniversary in his home there came among the countless messages of congratulation one bearing several hundred names of workingmen. The friend who read them would have cut short the reading with an "and so forth," but Bjørnson begged with tears in his eyes: "Oh, no, read them all; it is so good to hear them."

He came to the people of the valley as a man among men, not a landed proprietor, but a neighbor, richer, stronger, wiser than they, but still one of them. When they first came to Aulestad the poet and his wife visited their peasant neighbors regularly and welcomed them to their own beautiful home. As time went on Aulestad became more and more a gathering place for artists, writers, politicians, freaks from all the world over, and for the personal friends of whom no one ever had more. Bjørnson spent much of his time abroad, leaving the actual administration of the farm to his son Erling. His old friends passed away.

Still he could never be happy in celebrating any great event without feeling that the whole neighborhood took part. At his golden wedding the friends gathered at his house saw what seemed
a gigantic fiery snake winding down the hills and through the valley. It was a torch-light procession given by his neighbors, the first ever seen in that district.

That same evening, standing in the close circle of his children and grandchildren, with the larger circle of friends about him, Björnson paid his beautiful tribute to the woman whose high courage had made her a fit mate for him. The gold-bride wore a white gown and her veil of fifty years before with a wreath of gold myrtle in her white curls. A sprig of the same was in her husband’s buttonhole. Encircling her with his arm, he said:

“In you, Karoline, I have had a safe anchoring-place. You have been a brave soul. You understood all that I would do. Without this anchoring-place I could not have done it. From the time we two began, the best has been uppermost in me. The honor I ascribe to you. A poet has much of good and evil in him. He must develop through all possibilities. When you, Karoline, came to me, you threw your arms and your bridal veil about me. The brooch my mother gave me for my confirmation I gave to you. It was a sign that you were to continue her influence. From many mistakes I have always come back to you. You have been one with all that is best in me. I know that I shall die before you, that you will cover me with the shroud. Then you will perform a symbolical act: there is much in a man’s life that needs to be covered, much that is kept in check by having a wife like you.

“I thank you for everything in the past. For sympathy, love, faithfulness.”

It had been Björnson’s wish that his body should rest in the soil of Aulestad, but at the last he said: “No, put me where the others are.” He stipulated, however, that his coachman Peter, who no doubt had saved his master’s life in many a reckless drive, and an old horse that had been in his service almost as long as the man, should take him to the grave. It was not considered safe to trust the old horse in the noises of the city, but the servant was there to receive his master in that last home-coming with royal honors and every flag in his country at half-mast.

“Aulestad won’t be Aulestad without Björnson,” said Peter. As though nature itself mourned, the floods came shortly after Björnson’s death, washing away large parts of the farm with the saw-mill and electric light plant that were the owner’s chief pride. Aulestad is now in darkness and desolation.