

Verner von Heidenstam

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE FOR LITERATURE
FOR 1916.

By CHARLES WHARTON STORK.

When the news came over the cable a few days ago that the Nobel Prize for Literature had been awarded to Verner von Heidenstam, a Swedish poet, many may have been persuaded that patriotism had got the better of impartiality in the minds of the judges. One answer to these suspicions is a glance at the list of Nobel prize winners in the past: Prudhomme, Mommsen, Björnson, Mistral and Echégaray (prize divided), Sienkiewicz, Carducci, Kipling, Eucken, Lagerlöf, Heyse, Maeterlinck, Hauptmann, Anatole France, and Tagore. No one can say that this is not a carefully chosen list, divided impartially among the literatures of Europe and even representing the renaissance of Asia. If Selma Lagerlöf is one of the names less known in this country, it is a name much beloved on the Continent of Europe and rapidly becoming popular among readers of English. But a good answer to any charge of favoritism lies in the eminent talent of Heidenstam. It is safe to say that any committee with the claims of Swedish literature in mind would have counted Heidenstam among the leading candidates for the honor he has just received.

Verner von Heidenstam was born as far back as 1859. A member of a noble family, he received the best of intensive educations both at home and in travel. He realized the dream of nearly all Northern poets and spent a long period in the Orient and in Italy. The result was his first volume, "Pilgrimage and Wanderyears," which a native critic pronounces to be "one of the most brilliant debuts in Swedish poetry." He followed this by a novel of similar import, "Hans Alienus," which consists of pilgrimages after beauty in many ages and lands. But as in this novel the hero finally returns to Sweden, so its author returned and began to devote himself to the scenes of his native land. His second volume of verse, "Poems," published in 1895, was deservedly more popular than the first. Again he continued in a novel the mood initiated in lyric poetry, his "The Carolines" being a vivid description of the war between Charles XII and Peter the Great. Other novels and historical sketches followed, which, according to Mr. Edmund Gosse, entitle their author to rank "as a prose-writer whose monumental simplicity and classic beauty of style leave him without a rival among his contemporaries." A third, very characteristic, volume of lyrics appeared in 1915.

Heidenstam was the leader of a reaction against the unmitigated realism of Strindberg, which was dominant at the time he began to write. In this he was ably seconded by Oscar Levertin (1862-1906), a mystical poet, novelist, and essayist of Jewish descent. Both were enamoured of the beau-

ty of the remote, and both had a strongly personal lyric bent; but though Levertin was the smoother stylist, the influence of Heidenstam has proved to be the more marked and enduring. A more powerful spirit than either appeared about the same time in the person of Gustaf Fröding. All three of these poets were inspired to renew the tradition begun by Count Karl Snoilsky, who had come out as an epicurean lover of Italian beauty in 1869. His return from social exile to his native country in 1890, just at the time of the new reaction, was not without significance. After this date, however, Snoilsky's poetry became imbued with a more national spirit, just as was later that of Heidenstam.

I shall omit from this article any attempt to decide whether it is in his prose or in his verse that the fame of Heidenstam chiefly lies. That he is an important and popular poet there can be no doubt. Last summer a leading Stockholm newspaper requested its readers to send in the titles of their favorite poems to assist the present writer in selecting an anthology for translation into English. The result was, as expected, that Fröding came out well at the head of the list. After him, however, followed a tie between Heidenstam and Erik Axel Karlfeldt, another living poet. To be placed next to Fröding in Swedish poetry is a popular tribute of which any one might be proud, and it is no disparagement to Heidenstam's talent that he is tied with Karlfeldt, a poet of splendid vigor and one who usually makes a much wider appeal.

At first thought it is surprising that Heidenstam's poetry is popular at all. His subjects are frequently exotic and his moods usually introspective; his style is always compressed and abrupt, and at first repelling. Gradually, after much re-reading, the depth and power of the poet begin to fascinate the student. The sensation is something like looking down into the ocean through a confusion of waves and gloomy sea-weeds, until finally, far below, glimpses of something rich and strange begin to attract the eye. The chief fault in such a simile is that the style of Heidenstam, far from being always cold, is often shot through with intensity.

Above all, Heidenstam's poetry impresses one as being mainly the product of an isolated, self-conscious, and painfully sensitive mind. It is most often original in treatment and very seldom within the range of our ordinary feelings and interests. If the poet undertakes any given theme, he is more than likely to contradict the reader's expectations in his treatment. In a narrative poem, for instance, he seems to be deliberately undramatic, to disappoint in the climax much as do some of Meredith's novels. He at least resembles Meredith in caring nothing for action in itself, but only as it illuminates the soul of the actor.

In Heidenstam we discover two types of narrative: the exotic and more fanciful, and the native and more realistic. To the former class belongs the story of the Egyp-

tian poet, Djufar, who, when he is expected to burst out into a glowing song in praise of the beauty of the Orient, merely sinks his head and weeps: "He paints the joy of the East on an empty, tear-wet page." Nor is this restraint less sincere in his well-known poem, "Nameless and Immortal," in which the architect of the Temple of Neptune at Pæstum resolves not to chisel his name on the masterpiece, but to live by his deed alone. In "Childhood Friends," where the scene is laid in Sweden, we have a careful analysis of character which makes the poem seem like a novel of Henry James irregularly compressed into verse. In this type of study, found in the poet's second volume, there is a realism not unlike that of our own poet, Robert Frost, himself doubtless to some degree a disciple of James. The poets differ, however, in that "North of Boston" reads like a veracious record of fact, whereas the style of Heidenstam reveals an artistic personality which colors, arranges, and generalizes. There are exceptions as to the involved character of Heidenstam's longer poems, notably in "Songs from the Church-Tower," which is as direct as most of the others are complex. Here the bell-ringer, a man of the people, first rings in a future of class war; afterwards his wife changes the note to one of universal brotherhood. The whole poem is boldly conceived.

Passing from the narrative to the more exclusively lyrical poems, we come at once to the most characteristic phase of Heidenstam's talent in a number of very short subjective pieces. Few living writers are so concerned with their own spiritual secrets, and fewer still have put the problem with a simpler poignancy than may be seen in the following lines, entitled "Thoughts in Solitude":

There is a spark dwells deep within my soul.
To get it out into the daylight's glow
Is my life's aim both first and last, the whole.

It slips away, it burns and tortures me.
That little spark is all the wealth I know;
That little spark is my life's misery.

I have noted that Heidenstam's style is usually abrupt as well as compressed; it consists often of a number of rapid, illuminating flashes, none of them long enough to display more than a fraction of the writer's meaning. The logic is evasive. Herein some will find the fascination of the poet, for his flashes correspond to one's insight into the most baffling moments of consciousness. One recalls William James's simile of trying to turn on the gas quickly enough to see the darkness. The following lyric, most readers will feel, contains much that is imaginatively true, although—or perhaps because—there is much that is inexplicable:

HOW EASILY MANKIND IS MOVED TO
WRATH.

How easily mankind is moved to wrath!
In haste, with little knowledge of the art,
The many judge the individual heart.
But every heart a secret chamber hath,
Thereto a door whose lock no key will turn.
What oil the lamps within that chamber burn

No man may know. But through the keyhole stream

Pale, slender rays of light, and by their gleam
We move about and wake, and fall asleep.
It leads us; to our journey's end we keep
Along the pathway pointed by its beam.

The preceding is a good poem by which to test whether the reader is likely to care for a further acquaintance with Heidenstam. Another example of the poet's gift for condensation is more lucid:

A MAN'S LAST WORD TO A WOMAN.

Love-dazed, on rosy paths I sought thee far;
That was the spring, my gay and stormy prime.
Then I encountered thee in smiling war;
Those were the manhood years of summer-time.
I thank thee for the joy thy presence gave;
'Tis autumn, when our bed must be—the grave.

A point which needs repeated emphasis is the individuality of Heidenstam's poetic expression. It is no wonder, considering his curious individuality, that admiring Swedish critics confess to finding his work "exotic" and "uneven."

Heidenstam has Francis Thompson's sensitiveness, and in his lavish use of color is akin to Rossetti and to the Austrian philosophical poet of the present day, Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. He is, however, much less consistent in developing his thought than is any of the other three. Perhaps for this very reason he seems more earnest. He is too intense to work out the smoothly woven allegories of "The Hound of Heaven" and "Traum von Grosser Magie"; even a sonnet of Rossetti's would be impossible to him. He shifts from one picture or figure to another with an eagerness that is very confusing, yet rapidly as the pictures change, each is likely to be, for its purpose, a memorable stroke of artistry. As introspective as Poe, he is preoccupied with melancholy themes, especially with death, and not infrequently with the thought of his own death. There is, for instance, "Let Us Die Young," or the "First Night in the Churchyard," in the second of which the soul escapes from the coffin only to be hunted away from its former home, as though it were a stray dog. The daughter of Jairus, brought back to life, wishes to return to the bosom of her mother, Eternity. Heidenstam loves, too, to dwell on the isolation of the soul, or on the wandering of soul or body in strange lands. His poetry is only saved from overpowering morbidity by the vigor of the style, which tends to dispel the gloom inherent in the subject.

Yet why, with his many palpable defects, has Verner von Heidenstam won so high a place in the assembly of Swedish authors? The answer seems to lie mainly in the inter-related qualities of sincerity and freshness which have been noted. These make their strongest appeal in a sphere that I have not yet referred to: that of patriotic poetry in the widest sense. In a few fine lyrics Heidenstam escapes from his lonely, tortured self and throws his fervor into the celebration of all that is best in the landscape and the people of his native country. In "Home" we feel that a man's longing for the scenes of childhood has never been more beautiful-

ly rendered. And there are trumpet-notes of enthusiasm in "Native Land," "A Day," and particularly in "Sweden" that issue, as it were, from the breast of the earth and partake of its nobility. On this side Heidenstam suggests Masefield's "August, 1914," but has much more of a clarion ring. Who would recognize the morbid, introspective poet now? What wonder that the author of the following lines is dear to his fellow-countrymen?

SWEDEN.

Oh Sweden, Sweden, Sweden, native land,
Our earthly home, the haven of our longing!
The cow-bells ring where heroes used to stand,
Whose deeds are song, but still with hand in hand
To swear the ancient troth thy sons are thronging.

Fall, winter snow! And sigh, on earth's deep breast!

Ye orient stars, burn in the summer sky!
Sweden, dear mother, be our strife, our rest,
Thou land wherein our sons shall build their nest,
Beneath whose church-yard stones our fathers lie.*

Correspondence

VICARIOUS ATHLETICS.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: The real indictment of intercollegiate athletics is found in the fact that "we are annually graduating a few men of extraordinary athletic ability and many men of undeveloped intellectual power." These are the words of President Garfield, of Williams College, in an address at the latest annual convention of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. He thus phrases the most persistent of the many charges brought of late against intercollegiate athletics. "The most serious indictment," he says, "is not that huge expenditures are involved, that athletic coaches are paid as much as and more than college professors, that teams are thoroughly and rigorously trained. We are willing to spend the money and provide the training if the result justifies it. But it does not. A few only are highly trained; the majority not at all."

Do intercollegiate games tend to prevent or to promote athletics by all? In other words, is the opportunity for athletics by proxy on the grandstand an incentive to participation in intramural games, or is it more likely to be taken as a substitute? This is one of the main issues in the question whether intercollegiate athletics should be abolished.

In connection with this issue, we have had much theoretical discussion and some concrete evidence. The most comprehensive collection of facts is that of the committee on the encouragement of intracollegiate and recreative sports of the National Collegiate Athletic Association. The report was presented at the annual convention, December 30, 1913.

The statistics furnished this committee by 143 universities and colleges engaged in intercollegiate athletics show that about 17 per cent. of the total of male students partici-

*The translations in this article are very nearly literal and are in the metres and stanzaic forms of the originals.

pated in the intercollegiate games. In only one district of the country, the southwestern, did the proportion reach one-fourth. From the statistics concerning intramural games, the committee concludes that not more than 50 per cent. of the students in these institutions engage in any form of systematic or organized exercise, and they believe that 50 per cent. is "decidedly too high" an estimate. Out of the 143 colleges, all of which promote intercollegiate athletics, 53, or 37 per cent., "are doing nothing to foster and encourage the types of physical exercise and healthful recreation that the student is likely to use in after-college life."

Concerning expenditures, the committee finds that not one-tenth as much is spent for intramural games as for intercollegiate games. In other words, these 143 colleges spend about sixty times as much money for each member of an intercollegiate team as they spend for the games of each of the other students.

To what extent intercollegiate games are responsible for vicarious athletics, it is impossible to determine. But three facts are indisputable: (1) Intercollegiate games are the dominant influence in the athletics, even if they are not, indeed, the dominant influence in the entire life of these institutions. (2) Nearly all of them have had twenty years or more of experience to demonstrate whether this dominant influence tends to bring everybody into the games. (3) The net results, as reported by the promoters of intercollegiate athletics, are not encouraging.

Unfortunately, we have had little experience with athletics conducted solely for all students, entirely free from the good and bad influences of intercollegiate athletics, whatever they may be. The net results of such experience, whether encouraging or not, should be carefully noted. Six years ago, Reed College, before it had any students or faculty, announced as its policy, "Athletics in moderation and at little expense for all students, especially those in greatest need, instead of costly and excessive training for a few students, especially those in least need."

After having pursued this policy for five years, and having had no intercollegiate athletics whatever, the College made a careful record of its athletics for the last week of September, 1916. It appears to have been a typical week, differing from other weeks only as sports vary from season to season. No special attempt was made to induce students to participate; in fact, before they knew that any record was to be kept, the week was more than half gone. The record covers every student in attendance for that entire week, except those who were advised by the department of physical education not to participate in games on account of special, temporary disability.

During that week 92.8 per cent. of the men students and 93.5 per cent. of the women students took part in one or more of the following athletic games: tennis, tug-of-war, handball, hockey, football, basketball, squash, and track games. The proportion of the whole number playing these games ranged from 60 per cent. in tennis to 7 per cent. in track events. Sixty per cent. of the students took part in these games three or more days in the week; 75 per cent. took part in them two or more days in the week.

If we add swimming and boxing, the records for the week include 100 per cent. of the men students. Furthermore, 51 per cent. of