

**LEISURE HOUR SERIES;
THE FISHER-MAIDEN:
A NORWEGIAN TALE**

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Leisure Hour Series; The Fisher-Maiden: A Norwegian Tale by Björnstjerne Björnson

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BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSON

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LEISURE HOUR SERIES

THE
FISHER-MAIDEN

A NORWEGIAN TALE

BY
BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSEN, 1832-

FROM THE AUTHOR'S GERMAN EDITION

BY
M. E. NILES



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BJÖRNSTJERNE BJÖRNSSON.

From the London Spectator, Sept. 8, 1868.

GIGANTIC in the van of modern Scandinavian literature stand Oehlenschläger and Tegner—the first a rough, untutored, yet mighty Dane; the second a powerful, yet exquisitely cultivated Swede. A cluster of small lights surrounded each of these men, illumining Denmark and Sweden. Meanwhile Norway remained in comparative darkness. She had given Holberg to Denmark, and more recently had sent over Wergeland, but the splendid materials lying amid her perpetual snows, and glittering in the weird rays of her midnight sun, were positively disregarded. There was room for a true genius; one with poetic insight, and thorough faith in the simple element at his command; and surely such a man has recently arisen in Björnsson, a young Norwegian, (*) whose nationality is marked in every line he has written. He is the herald of a new school; perhaps as fine a school as a country so peculiarly situated and thinly populated as Norway, can ever produce; for where there is no mighty national movement, no complicated action of masses, there can be no great philosophy, and no real drama. With Björnsson, however, begins the true Gothic school, about which Tegner (the Matthew Arnold of the North) blundered so beautifully. He has drawn straight on nature for his capital. He is content with the simplest elements, yet takes care to assimilate

(* Born in 1842.)

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them exquisitely. He is not a Milton, capable of producing a Christian epic; nor a Dante, capable of constructing an all-embracing allegory of personal suffering; nor a Goethe, capable of founding a science of culture. He is merely an idyllic thinker, exhibiting some creative fortitude, and wealthy in delicate suggestion. His genius has the characteristics of a white summer cloud—quiet motion, and still power, a dropping of scarcely seen dew, without the gleam of the lightning, or the sob of the heavy rain.

The story of *Arne*, in the English version, will fairly introduce Herr Björnson to our readers. *Arne* is written in the author's finest mood. In no other work is his touch more delicate, his insight more subtle, his language more rich in its simplicity. It is very short and nearly perfect, containing few incidents, only one or two characters, and not one solitary attempt at fine writing; and so far from being a mere sketch, it is a prose idyl, essentially poetic. To paint portraits or landscapes is not the poet's business; his task rather is to make faces loom upon us spiritually, and to pass the sensation of beautiful truths through the emotions into the mind. Björnson never merely *describes*, but again and again, by means of a sudden flash of color, or a characteristic, or a stray expression, he makes us acquainted with a scene or with a soul, and that with all the felicity of revelation. Now and then indeed the light, generally concentrated and subdued, is suffered to overflow, and in most of these cases the page is flooded with unusual beauty. Though the color be generally true and subdued, there are instances enough of spilt tints and bright touches to show that Björnson, an artist in the best sense of the word, has not regulated his inspiration by too positive a culture. . . .

Quite as fine as *Arne*, and written in a somewhat similar vein, is the idyl of *A Happy Lad*, not yet done into English. Here love is again the theme—the love of a cotter-boy for a young lady of the middle classes; but the hero and heroine, both of whom are mere little children when first introduced to the reader, are much more clearly marked than Arne and Eli. Herr Björnson delights in putting very young figures in the centre of his pictures, and surrounding them with figures representing the wisdom, the endurance, the sorrow, the wickedness of maturer age. A fine foil to the simple cotter-boy, to whom the world has been a golden dream until he discovers that he is only a cotter-boy, is found in the character of his old schoolmaster, whose nature is laid bare to us by a succession of delicate suggestions. Everywhere we find sweet pictures, delicious representations, of real country life in Norway. . . .

Of the general plot of the tale we will give no further idea, save to observe that the complete work, like *Arne*, is much better than any detached portion of it. We shall welcome with great interest a translation of this and other books, especially of some of the tiny pieces (such as the exquisite little fragment called "The Father") in which Björnson is particularly happy. Surely writing so admirable will not be lost on English writers; surely the welcome accorded to *Arne* will be such as to encourage the translators to give us more. (*) . . .

To conclude these remarks concerning an author who

(*) The Fisher-Maiden, Björnson's latest work, was published simultaneously in Norwegian and German in 1858. This tale, in which he gives a poetical delineation of the heroine's character, and of the irresistible power of innate vocation—with some original arguments in defence of the theatre—has met with so great a success in Germany that three translations have already appeared, besides the author's own German edition.

is soon to be better known, Björnson, it seems to us, is great in his way, because he is so real. He strikes no false notes, though he never catches the roll of the thunder. He *feels* life with strange acuteness, though he may not see very deep into life. He has looked on the face of nature, though he knows not nature's mightiest and most tragic looks. In a word, he writes a delicious prose idyl and sings a genuine lyric. Are these small gifts? On the contrary, they are great and unique gifts. The faculty which feels life sensitively is as rare as the faculty which thinks out life philosophically; and when these two faculties are combined with creative instincts we have a great creative genius—frequently a great dramatist. The faculty of assimilating life unemotionally, and of assorting imaginative perceptions "scientifically," has after all little to do with any of the others. Those belong to genius, this to incisive talent. The first produce a Plato or an Æschylus, even a Shakespeare; the second produces a Spinoza or a George Elliot. The exquisite emotional apprehension of beautiful truths, combined with musical sympathies, constitutes sometimes a faculty in itself, and yields to mankind a lyrist like Tennyson and an idyllic thinker like Björnson.





THE FISHER-MAIDEN.

CHAPTER I.

ON coasts long frequented by herring, and favorably situated in other respects, towns gradually spring up. Such towns may not only be said to have sprung from the sea, but, in the distance, to resemble a mass of spars, and the *débris* of wrecks floated ashore, or a number of keeled boats drawn to land some stormy night by the fishermen, and turned upside down for shelter. A nearer view shows how carelessly the whole town is built—rocks standing in the middle of the streets, or water overrunning the place and separating it into three or four islands. The streets themselves wind and curve, and seem to be crawling up hill. In one respect, however, these towns are all alike. The harbor serves as shelter for the largest ships. Its waters are as placid as a lake; consequently these havens, closely surrounded as they are by high walls of rock, are specially grateful to ships which, with torn sails and parted rigging, are driven hither from the open sea to seek quiet and repair.