

## A NORWEGIAN POET'S HOME.

TWENTY-FIVE years ago there appeared in the humble pages of the "Illustreret Folkeblad" the beautiful creation of Björnson's early genius, "Synnöve Solbakken," that exquisite tale of Norwegian peasant life, which soon established the author's reputation, and which began, in fact, a new era in the literature of his country.\*

Björnson lives at Aulestad, about ten English miles from the town of Lillehammer. At this part of the Gausdal valley its eastern side slopes gently down to the river Gausa. As far as the eye can reach are wide tracts of cultivated fields and meadows, dotted here and there with gayly painted farmsteads, while the western side of the valley is steep and thickly covered with pine forests, which present a rather somber contrast to the bright and smiling landscape of the opposite side. On a gentle eminence in the midst of this truly pastoral scenery Aulestad, with its many buildings and outhouses, is conspicuous.

Herè, in the midst of the brave and sturdy folk whom Björnson loves so well, and surrounded by the characteristic scenery of his country which he has so vividly depicted, this true and noble son of the people feels himself at home. Aulestad was to me, indeed, the very "Solbakken" I had dreamt of,— "that high spot in the large valley on which the sun shines from its rising to its setting." I begin to look for "Granliden" on the opposite side of the valley under the shadow of the mountains, "where they had less sun," and whence young Thorbjörn gazed at the bright and sunny home of little Synnöve. I see the church, high up on the hill,— "as the peasant always thinks of it, on a high spot, lonely, peaceful, and sanctified,"— where Thorbjörn first saw the fair-haired, smiling girl. I even begin to look for the two lovers among the groups of haymakers at work in the fields near the road.

When Björnson in 1874 bought Aulestad, the dwelling-house was a large, two-storied building in the ordinary style of Norwegian farm-houses, but he soon transformed it into a comfortable and pleasant modern country-house. By the introduction of balconies in the upper story, and a spacious gallery or veranda around the ground floor of the house, the exterior in its bright white paint resembles

somewhat the pleasant Swiss villas so common in the neighborhood of Norwegian towns.

I am introduced, by and by, to the study of the master. It is situated in the second story in the south-western corner of the building, its windows overlooking that part of the valley. The room is necessarily large and spacious, for Björnson often walks up and down when his busy brain is at work, while writing or talking. So when speaking in public, Björnson cannot confine himself behind a lecturer's desk or table. The walls of the study are of a somber green, enlivened by gilt edging and by a few oil-paintings and photographs. One of these is a portrait of the poet's father, in the peculiar dress of a Norwegian clergyman,— a fine face, full of character and vigor. Between the two windows opposite the entrance is a large bust of Goethe on a pedestal, and on the poet's writing-table, to the left, are two antique marble busts. On the massive oak table at the right-hand side of the room were exhibited, at the time of my first visit to the study, the presents to the poet on this occasion of his jubilee, the twenty-fifth anniversary of his first book. Among these were a chased silver inkstand, with a figure of Minerva, and the inscription, "With thanks from woman," a drinking-horn of silver, from Swedish friends, and an antique jug with silver lid, once the property of Björnson's great-great-grandmother, and now presented to him by some neighboring farmers. A couple of his friends at the university had sent him two fine polar-bear-skin rugs. The house was filled with flowers sent by his peasant friends, and on the oaken table lay heaps of letters and telegrams of congratulation from friends all over the world. Near the door is a massive and curiously made book-case, full of books and pamphlets. In this room have been written the poet's later works, "The King," "Magnhild," "Giuseppe Mansana," "Leonarda," "The New System," "Dust," etc.

Through a pleasant anteroom, full of book-cases, pictures, and mirrors, I make my way to the hall below and enter the charming sitting-room, situated directly underneath the poet's study, homelike and beautiful with its plants and pictures and portfolios of photographs. On the right-hand side of the door stands the piano, which has not been long silent during the visit of the eldest son, who possesses a

\* See an article entitled "Björnstjerne Björnson," by H. H. Boyesen, in this magazine for July, 1880.



fine voice and plays the piano with the practiced hand of an accomplished musician. Beyond the sitting-room is a dainty little white room or cabinet, full of books, busts, and pictures, where one can while away hours of retirement in communion with the master minds of the three northern nations.

On passing through the hall, where I find portraits of literary and political celebrities on the walls, I enter the dining-room, a long room with oak-painted walls and furniture to match. At the end of the room is a handsome buffet, with cupboards full of valuable silver tankards, drinking-horns, cups, etc. The large dinner-table extends nearly the whole length of the room; and here the family and the guests, with the housekeeper and the manager of the farm, take their meals together in good old Norwegian style.

The preparations for the jubilee to-day have been made in a large storehouse in the farm-yard behind. The lower part of this building has been transformed into a picturesque banqueting-room. The walls and the roof are entirely clad with pine branches and gayly decorated with flags and flowers. Round the walls are placed oval red shields bearing in gilt letters the names of all Björnson's works, from "Synnöve Solbakken" to his last story, "Dust." Extensive preparations are still going on for the afternoon's feast.

It is now about noon, and some of the guests are beginning to arrive. Flags are flying from the tall masts around the farm-yard,—the flags of the three Scandinavian countries and that of the United States, the latter a present from a friend in America. Smaller flags are placed at short distances along the veranda round the house, which is hung with festoons of foliage and flowers; and it is plain to see that there is high festival to-day at Aulestad.

It is no doubt fortunate that the poet should be able to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of his first and beautiful creation, the sweet "Synnöve," in the very heart of the country, and among the people whom he has so truly depicted in his books. Here, far away from the bustle and conventionalities of town, this truly national poet, still in the prime of life, can now receive the congratulations of his countrymen in a manner congenial both to himself and to them. Little could the young, striving author, who in 1857 was penning "Synnöve Solbakken" at Copenhagen under anything but promising circumstances, dream that this, the beloved child of his imagination, would thus celebrate her twenty-fifth birthday! And what has not passed in these years? The unknown author, in his very first attempt, struck a chord in the heart of the people which gave a new impulse to the national life that

was dawning on Norway. The poet became a patriot; he thrills the minds of his countrymen as he speaks to them of their duty to themselves and their country, and stirs up the old independent spirit of the Norsemen. The part he has taken in the political struggle between the King and the Norwegian people has been most important; and the future historian will no doubt inscribe the name of the bard in the honorable place which it deserves on the list of champions in his country's rights. The Norwegian people of to-day appreciate his labors. They have not sung his songs in vain; they understand him; and on a day like this it is no wonder that enthusiasm runs high, not only at Aulestad, but all over the country.

It is a sight to be remembered to see the fine, healthy-looking, well-dressed peasantry, from the wealthy farmer to the humble cottager, with their wives and grown-up sons and daughters, arriving at the farm, and to see the hearty reception given to all by Björnson and his wife. The farm-yard is nearly full of guests. Among the last arrivals is the respected pastor of the parish, who, in spite of the difference of opinion on religious matters between himself and Björnson, will not be debarred from paying this homage to the gifted son of his country on his jubilee-day. Kristofer Janson, another popular poet, and Björnson's near friend and neighbor, who is on the point of starting for America, is also here; the two local members of the Storting and other leading men in the parish have arrived.

There is now a stir at the door at the rear of the house; a procession, headed by Björnson and his mother, moves across the lawn to the banqueting-room. As soon as the principal guests have entered and taken their seats, the crowd follow and make their way to the well-spread tables. The total absence of any distinction between the different classes is indeed pleasant to witness. One might almost imagine oneself a thousand years back in the hall of one of the Jarls of old; the chieftain and his followers feasting in high style together. And have we not before us here as fine a representative of the old Norseman as we could wish? The fine, broad-shouldered figure of the hero of the day, with the noble head and the lion's mane, looks every inch a Jarl; and as we gaze round at the faces of the sturdy peasants, there is no mistaking these, the descendants of the hardy Norsemen.

The speeches are opened by Kristofer Janson, who is glad of the opportunity to offer Björnson his thanks and last farewell, before leaving Gausdal. Janson dwells especially upon the progress, the development of Björnson's genius during the twenty-five years that



have passed, and remarks that the minds of the Norwegian people have grown with him. They all love "Synnöve", but they love and value no less Björnson's later works, "The King," "The New System," and his political speeches. Janson also dwells upon the importance of his political work. "Many understand you now, but the day will come when the whole of the people will understand you, because the Norwegian people are learning to understand a full-grown, a dauntless champion of liberty." Janson concludes with thus addressing Björnson: "We thank you for your songs, we thank you for your life, we thank you because you have lived even better than you have sung." Björnson's health is then drunk with the greatest enthusiasm.

The speeches that follow are principally greetings from the sister countries, the Swedish and Danish guests speaking as warmly of Björnson and his works as the poet's own countrymen. A number of songs, written especially for the occasion, are sung after the different speeches. Many of the telegrams from absent friends and admirers, including the poet Henrik Ibsen, are read amidst great applause. Even from so far as Minneapolis and Madison, in America, have friends telegraphed their congratulations. Janson also reads a poem of his own composition, which accompanies a purse of golden coins from friends in Bergen.

Björnson then rises, and with deep emotion thanks all the company for the many proofs of friendship and affection that he has received this day. He assures them that the same motives, the same love of his country and of the people which prompted him to write "Synnöve Solbakken," have also prompted him in all his later work, referring especially to the stand he has taken in political and religious controversies.

Ample justice having been done to the truly Norwegian dinner, the guests adjourn to the lawn outside or to the veranda and other available seats around the house. Coffee and cigars are served, and the rest of the evening is spent in pleasant converse. The guests begin to take their departure, and as I am leaning over the balustrade of the veranda and follow their retreating figures down to the road in the mystic light of the northern summer night, I feel that I have "lived a day" with men and women who, whatever their station in society may be, help to make history and to elevate the life of a nation.

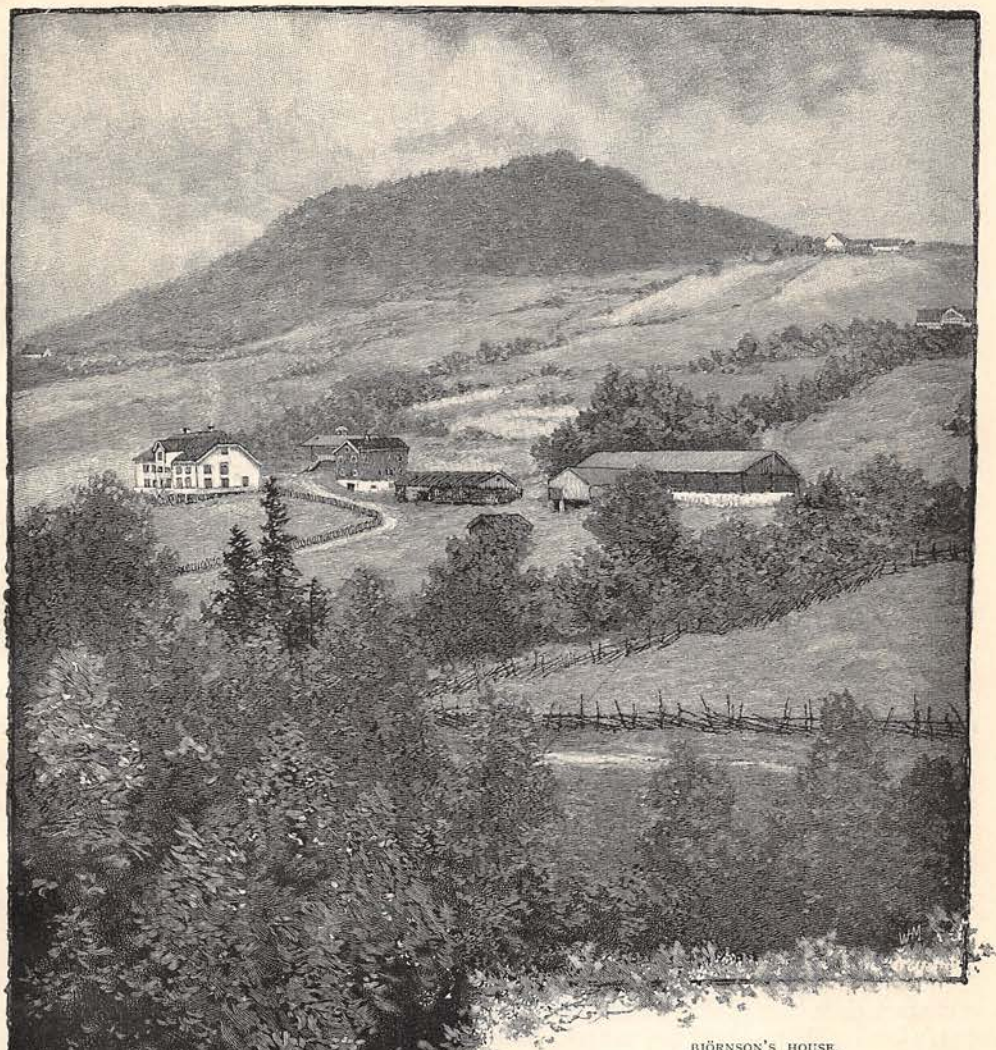
Next day the town guests and some of Björnson's special friends from the neighboring farms meet again round the festive board of our host. I am sitting opposite the poet Drachmann, and notice that from time to time,

in the midst of the hubbub of loud and merry voices, himself taking no little share in it, he is jotting down a line or two on a scrap of paper. Presently he rises, and asking permission to bid farewell to Aulestad, which he regrets he is obliged to leave so soon, he reads a poem, the composition of which I had seen him, across the table, "putting together" under the distracting conditions referred to. I believe he writes poetry as humbler mortals scribble off a friendly note. In the evening some of the guests take their departure to be in time for the steamer from Lillehammer next morning, while some remain a few days longer.

Björnson is an early riser. He and his wife are generally found at the breakfast-table at six o'clock in the morning. The other members of the family do not make their appearance till one or two hours later, while for guests the breakfast-table is laid up to ten o'clock. After breakfast Björnson is generally found in the anteroom upstairs, reading his letters and newspapers. The mails are delivered here early in the morning, and the poet himself is the first to examine them and scan the papers, eager to learn the latest news from the great world beyond his peaceful valley. Often in the morning, when I have descended from my little room for an early stroll, have I found Björnson with a newspaper in his outstretched arms, while a hearty, ringing laugh or a loud outburst of admiration announces the pleasure he feels at hearing of some victory of the Liberal party in his country or of the success of any progressive movement abroad. As soon as Björnson has finished reading, he usually, in fine weather, takes a stroll round his farm or spends some time in conversation with any casual guest. He then goes to his study, and there he remains hard at work the greater part of the forenoon. His wife is, as far as I could understand, the only privileged intruder at this time.

Towards noon Björnson prepares to go to his bath. "Come, and I will show you the finest shower-bath in the world," he says, and slings a towel across his shoulder, and off we start. We pass through a field and enter a copse, where we soon hear the roar of rushing water. We descend by a path through the underwood, and emerge suddenly upon a small river, full of rapids and miniature waterfalls. We walk along the bank a short distance till we come to a most picturesque spot, a mountain glen, in fact, through which the river rushes wildly between the boulders and monster stones that impede its course. Right in front of me I behold with awe the "shower-bath" of which I had heard. From some distance above a volume of water has been





BJÖRNSON'S HOUSE.

led through a conduit supported on lofty spars, discharging itself at a considerable height just above a wooden platform which has been

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erected here with strong handrails around it. A part of the water has, of course, in its descent, been transformed into spray, but the main body of it falls with a deafening roar on the platform below. Towards this platform I soon discern the nude herculean figure of the poet making his way along the plank-laid gangway that leads from the rustic dressing-room in a shady nook to the platform. He steps under the waterfall, and, seizing the handrail with both hands, turns his back to the foaming current, which wildly and angrily rebounds from his unflinching figure, sending the spray and splash in all directions. It is a shower-bath with a vengeance, and no doubt "unrivaled in the world," suited only to hardy constitutions and strong nerves. The force of falling waters is enough to wash any





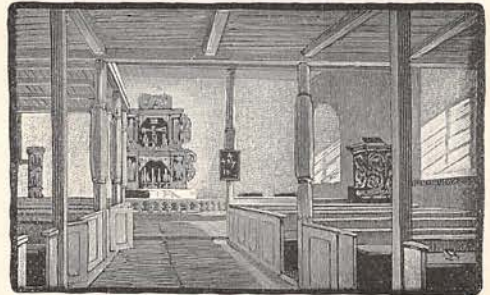
BJÖRNSSON'S STUDY.

commonplace mortal away into the shallow pool below the platform, where an ordinary bath can be enjoyed undisturbed. To a nature like that of our poet, this daily bath in the cool mountain waters must be highly congenial and invigorating. Björnson's health is remarkably sound and strong, and he does everything to preserve it. He has entirely given up smoking, and is almost a total abstainer. Since his visit to America, where he was struck with the constant absence of wines and spirits from the dinner-tables of the upper classes, he only on very rare occasions partakes of any alcoholic beverage.

After dinner Björnson takes half an hour's nap; and during the warm summer days everybody seems to follow his example. On fine days the members of the family and their guests assemble after the short siesta for the afternoon coffee at a large table in a shady corner at the back of the house, where a lively conversation is kept up for some time, Björnson himself joining heartily in it. Round this table all the burning questions of the day, political, social, and religious, have been debated with that fire and enthusiasm which is a characteristic trait of all the members of the poet's family. Björnson cannot, as a rule, while engaged in any conversation or discussion, sit long quiet; he will rise from the table, and, putting his hands in his pockets, will pace backwards and forwards, keeping up meanwhile a running fire of talk and repartee, and stopping now and then in front of the person with whom he is discussing, when there is anything he is specially anxious to impress upon his hearers. Suddenly breaking off in the midst of his talk, he will take a run across the lawn with his youngest daughter, and after a merry romp with her on the grass will return and resume the conversation. Later on in the afternoon he will frequently take a long walk round his grounds and see to the servants and laborers at work on different parts of the estate. Björnson has a kind, encouraging word for all, showing a sincere interest in his people's domestic affairs. In the haymaking time he often joins the haymakers, and with a light

rake of American fashion will do wonderful work among them. I remember especially one day, when his people were busy getting in the last loads of hay, and the sky suddenly became overcast, how Björnson, after having pressed the whole household into field service,—his sons, daughters, cook, servant-maids, and a couple of guests,—started off at the head of the "rescue party" to the hay-field. Load after load was filled by the merry gang and carted up to the farm; the rain, however, overtook them before the last loads were in, and the party returned drenched to the skin, while Björnson was as proud as if he had won some literary or political victory.

One great ambition of Björnson's life has been to improve the conditions of the Norwegian tenantry (*Husmænd*). No doubt the cottiers, since the passing of the *Husmandslov* of 1851, are, as far as the terms and character of their leases are concerned, as well off as the tenantry in any country of Europe. Still, Björnson thinks the legislature should go a step further to improve their condition, and especially to assist them in becoming the freehold owners of the soil. As the landlords can scarcely be expected to make a gift of the land to their tenants, some scheme would have to be worked out by which the tenant might, in a certain number of years, pay off the sum agreed upon for its price. At the present time the tenantry are, as a rule, unable to save up any money, as they have little opportunity of earning anything beyond the amount necessary for their daily wants, and very little ready money passes through their hands. The rent and any corn and fodder the tenant may buy of his landlord are generally paid for in manual labor by the tenant or his family. The tenant himself is by his contract bound to work four or five days in the week for the landlord, at a very low wage; but it is generally only in the busy seasons of the year, especially in the spring and autumn, that the landlord avails himself of so much of the tenant's time. The tenant has, however, his own ground to cultivate, and there is consequently little time



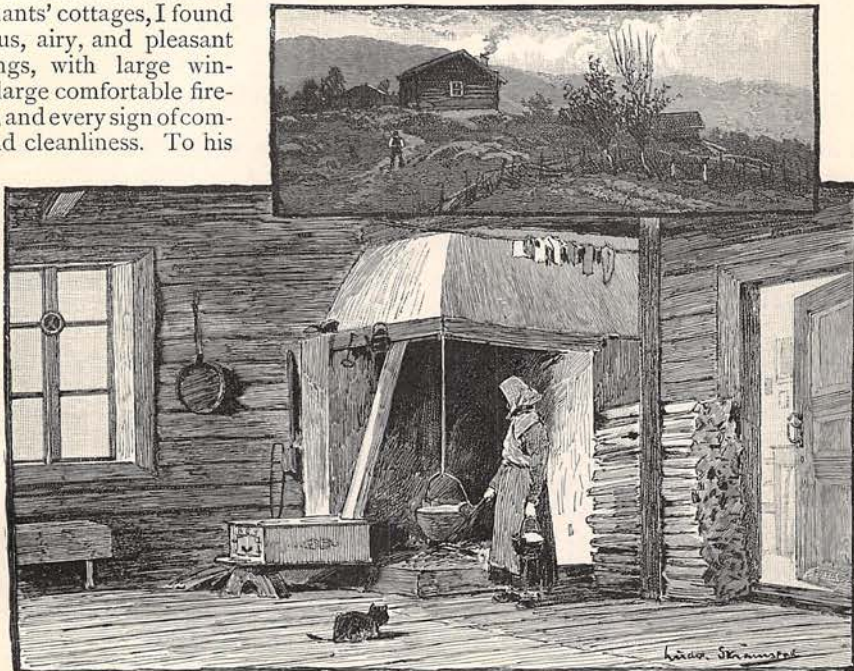
IN THE CHURCH.



or opportunity left for him to earn anything by extra employment, unless, indeed, he be an expert in some handicraft. The lease is always for the natural life of the tenant and his wife, and at their death it is, as a rule, renewed by one of the children. For any improvements made by the tenant compensation is secured by law in case of the tenant's leaving. As soon as Björnson became a landlord he set to making what improvements he could. The houses of his tenants were his first care. He has now rebuilt some of these, and I was pleasantly surprised at their appearance. Instead of the small, dark, and badly ventilated rooms which one is accustomed to see in the tenants' cottages, I found spacious, airy, and pleasant dwellings, with large windows, large comfortable fireplaces, and every sign of comfort and cleanliness. To his

which he may be engaged, or he reads some of the national folk and fairy tales, or some new popular book. As a reader or orator Björnson has scarcely an equal. Gifted with a wonderfully melodious voice, which he knows how to modulate with the skill of an experienced actor, he fairly enralls his audience, and when at any point his subject rouses him to a passion of fervor, it is like a burst of thunder in the room, his powerful voice filling the whole apartment and electrifying his hearers, as that of no other speaker I have heard.

On other evenings we settle down in one or more groups on the veranda, enjoying the



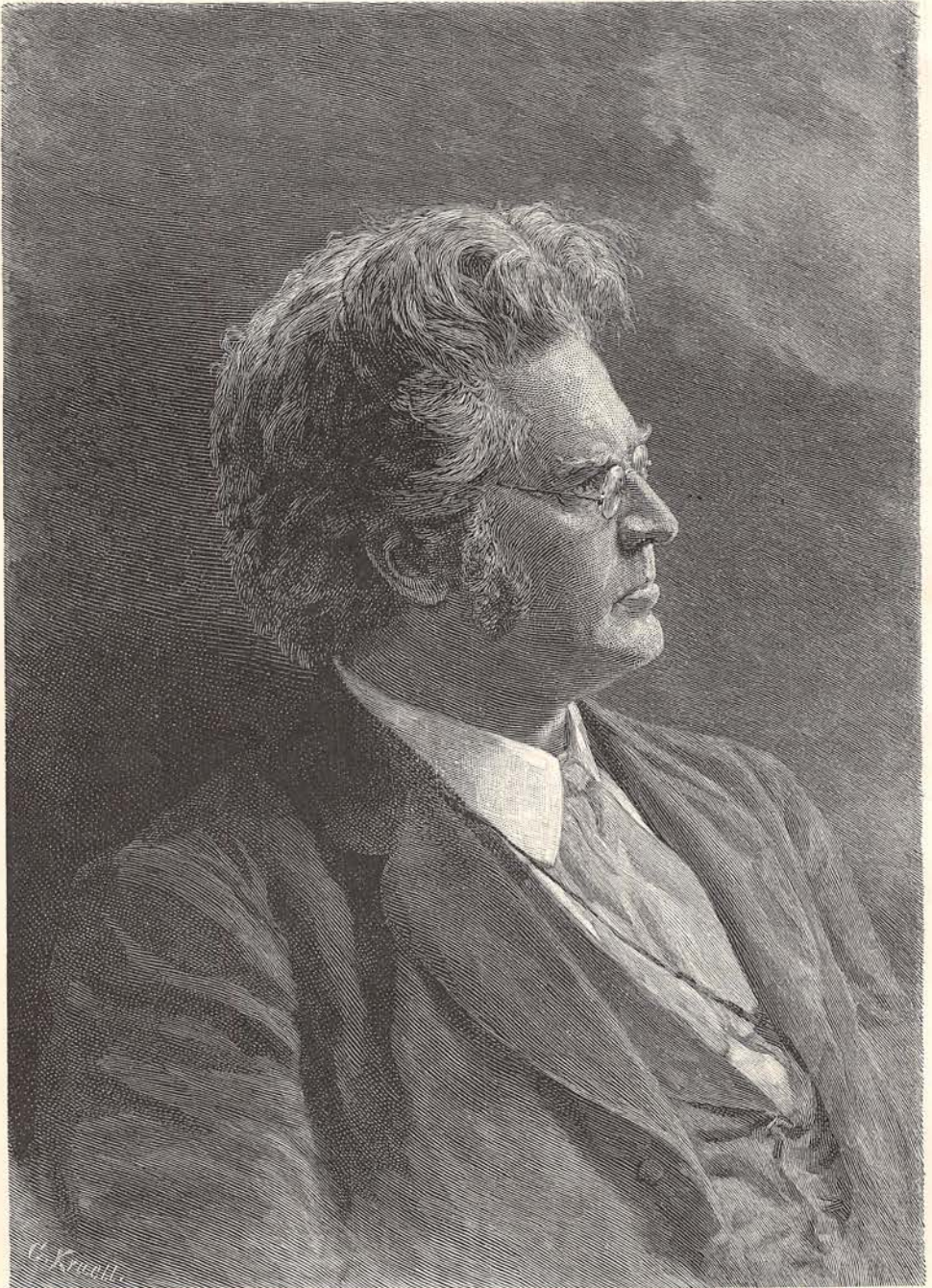
A TENANT'S COTTAGE.

tenantry Björnson is not so much the landlord as the friend. As I have already observed, he takes a great interest in all their affairs, and has a kind, attentive ear for their sorrows and joys.

Björnson generally resumes work in the afternoon, and keeps close at it in his study till the evening meal is announced, after which he gives himself up entirely to his family and friends. If the weather is unfavorable out-of-doors, they gather in a pleasant circle in the cozy sitting-room, listening to the songs of Schumann and Schubert, or to some delightful ballads from southern climes, which the eldest son has brought home with him; or the room resounds with the mighty tones of Wagner's masterpieces. Wagner is, by the by, a great favorite at Aulestad. Sometimes Björnson reads aloud passages of any work on

soft, balmy air and a quiet chat, while some light refreshments are handed round. It is pleasant to look back upon some of those delightful evenings on the veranda. Before us lies the immense valley, bathed in the beautiful mystic twilight of the North, while borne to us on the wings of the evening breeze comes the murmur of the distant Gausa, mingled with the lowing of the cows and the tinkling of their bells from the fields below the farmstead. An air of peace and comfort rests over the whole landscape; nature is going to sleep; the conversation on the veranda dies away; all seem impressed by the grandeur of the scene and give themselves up to quiet meditation and enjoyment. Happy valley, happy people! worthy of a poet's home!





Engraved by G. Kruell.

Photographed by Notman.

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