

Georg Brandes

A Silhouette

By Julie Norregard

AN old ballad sings of Denmark as a swan's nest, thrown on the blue sea.

Her sons are the swans.

Of these many have kept close to the nest, patiently strengthening and guarding it, till they sank in death and their saga ended.

But there were other swans with mightier wills and more arduous desires. These spread out their strong wings and flew over the world, bringing to foreign lands tidings of their humble homestead. Their names are shining in gold on the silver tablets of fame: Thorvaldsen, Orsted, Hans Christian Andersen, Gade, and there, forcibly writ—the youngest of them all—Georg Brandes.

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The youngest, yes, but not the least illustrious. For, indeed, in every city throughout Europe where literature holds a place of honour, his name is known as that of the finest of living critics.

He is a special favourite in Berlin and Vienna, and is treated as a prince in St. Petersburg. His very name is a banner of liberty
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to the Polish student, and the Tzecs look up to him as one of the bravest fighters for freedom. In Paris he belongs to those artistic circles to which but few foreigners are welcomed. Amongst his best friends are Bourget and Daudet, as was the late M. Taine, who, Dr. Brandes says, was the man who, more than any other, has influenced his mind and opinions.

The country that has honoured him least, and least understood the value of his genius, is the land to which he has given his youth, his work, and the very finest music of his soul—the land where he was born—Denmark.

When, therefore, during his recent stay in London, the representative of the *Daily Chronicle* asked him "What is your position in Copenhagen?" it was the bitter truth Dr. Brandes spoke when he answered, "I have none."

Indeed, none of those honours governments are accustomed to bestow on the best men in the country have been bestowed on him. He was the only man for the chair of æsthetics at the University, but pedantic prejudice has denied it him for years. He has no title, no decoration, no subsidy. He is seldom a guest at Court, nor is he a lion in the salons of the aristocracy.

From a social point of view he might even be called a nobody.

Yet, for all that, there is no Danish citizen with a finer, more significant position. His influence, however unacknowledged, is far-reaching and of a curiously subtle power. It shows itself everywhere. Many are those whose whole lives have been changed by a word of his. His helping hand, stretched out in the last moment, has saved for the nation art and individualities, which otherwise might have vanished into Nirvana.

There is not to-day in Denmark, Norway, or Sweden, an author, a thinker, a critic, from the greatest to the youngest aspirant, who
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does not owe something to Georg Brandes. His honours lie in their gratitude, his kingdom in their hearts.

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Having taken his degree as a doctor at the University of Copenhagen, he has a right to lecture in the buildings of the University, and he has largely exercised that right. It was the 3rd of November 1871, after his return from a journey to Italy, that Georg Brandes gave his first lecture. Timidly, he had chosen the smallest room. But on his arrival he found people standing all down the staircase, and already the first evening the largest room had to be used. It is this room, No. 7, which has ever since been the forum whence his inspired words have gone forth.

It was here, through his lectures, even more than through his books, that he influenced the minds of young Danish men and women.

How well I remember those evenings, twice a week, when we stood together waiting outside the big door. It was not opened till seven o'clock, but to secure a seat we had to be there long before. All young, all enthusiastic, all dreaming of the possibilities life had in store for us, we stood there, crowded together on the steps leading to the portal. Round us the quiet square, clad in its robe of snow; behind us the dome, silent and solemn. Over us the moon and a thousand stars glittering with that cold radiance only known in the winter nights of the north.

Woe to the porter, if he did not open for us the minute the big clock sounded. How we used to hammer on the door, till it echoed through the old buildings. Then there was the run upstairs, the rush down the corridors, the crush and struggle, till at last one could breathe contentedly in one's favourite corner.

A few minutes after, a storm of clapping hands; then silence.

On the cathedra stood Georg Brandes.

A tall, lithe figure, dressed simply but with scrupulous care. And what a wonderful face is his ! Irregular features, some might even be called ugly ; it seems impossible to say exactly what they are like, captivated as one is by their ever-changing expression—quiet thoughtfulness flashing into humour, tired melancholy breaking into a sunlit smile.

He speaks without pose and affectation, seems scarcely to raise his voice above the pitch of ordinary conversation, yet it carries each phrase to the furthest corner of the room. But behind the quietness is felt the quivering of a passionate nature, which now and then, when he is roused by some best loved or best hated theme, flashes on the audience with a suddenness that electrifies. Sometimes we would follow him with Goethe to the Court of Weimar, or another time he would reveal to us the gigantic fancy concealed behind the mountains of dull description in the works of Zola. With glowing words he would paint for us the poetry and romance of Polish literature, or illuminate for us the golden thoughts of Niezche, young Germany's ill-fated philosopher.

Winter after winter has passed, and youth has fled with the years. The sadness in his eyes has deepened, and his hair is touched with silver, but his vitality is still the same, his spiritual alertness as keen as ever. Still he gathers round him the young men and women of Copenhagen, and when he showers on them the sparks of his own rich personality, he sets aflame the smouldering fire of their natures, brings into bloom the flowers that lie sleeping in their souls.

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A favourite saying of Dr. Brandes' is " that men and women can be divided into three classes—those who command, those who obey, and those who can neither command nor obey and that *they* ought

ought to be killed," and how savagely his voice rings out the last word—it sounds like the click of the guillotine.

Many minutes are not needed to find out to what class he himself belongs. It is written on his brow that he was born to command, was intended by the Norns for a leader of men. Many are the incidents in his life which show how his strong will has carried everything before him.

More characteristic than any seems this little story of how his first pamphlet was printed. He was a very young man at the time, known only in University circles as a promising student, and publicly his name meant nothing. He had written a paper upon some burning question of the day, and brought it to one of the big printers at Copenhagen. Calling shortly afterwards to fetch the proofs, he found that nothing had yet been done with the MS. The manager told him in rather an off-handed way that he must wait, they had other important work to do first. Georg Brandes looked at him hard, and told him that no work could be more important than his, and that his MS. must be set up at once—his MS. could never wait. "Let me tell the printers myself," he said.

Before the astonished manager could interfere he heard from the workroom a clear, strong voice commanding the men that whenever they got his writings they must put aside all other work and do his first. But such was the fire of his temperament, such the will-power in his face, that the men did not shrug their shoulders as at a madman, but instead they gave him an "Hurrah!" and followed out his orders. Shortly after he began writing his books, and every morning he brought to the printers some few sheets, of which the proofs were sent to him in the evening. The curious point in his method of working is that he gets his books printed page by page as he goes along. For as wine invigorates the blood, so does the printed word inspire his brain.

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Here, as in so many other ways, he shows himself an impatient man—a man who must not be kept waiting. His desires must be fulfilled at once. In this there would lie danger for his work were not his impatience balanced by great perseverance. His impatience does not make him hurry; his work is finished as that of few other writers, and no pains seem to him too great, no trouble too tedious, if thereby his book may be strengthened.

Thus he gave twenty-three years of his life to his most important work, "Main Currents of European Literature in the Nineteenth Century." To convey an idea of the varied knowledge he possesses, I give the sub-titles. They are: "The Literature of Emigrants," "The Romantic School in Germany," "The Reaction in France," "Naturalism in England," "The Romantic School in France," and "Young Germany."

The last six years Dr. Brandes "has lived with Shakespeare," to use his own phrase. The first two volumes of his study of him have appeared in Danish, the last and third he is now writing. Fortunately, this great work is being translated into English by Mr. William Archer, and when it appears will, without doubt, make a deep impression. Dr. Brandes hopes that he has been successful in his attempt to bring forth the great poet's personality by a critical study of his work. "For," as he says, "when a writer leaves thirty volumes behind him, it is the world's fault if it knows nothing of his life." Of the critical value of the book, others more competent must judge. I can only say that it reads like a fairy-tale.

Though crammed with facts, it does not belong to the "dry goods" of literature. The historical events of that most picturesque period of English history are painted in colouring, the glow and richness of which remind one of some great master of the Renaissance, and the exposition of the dramas is so subtle, so
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fantastically vivid, that it seems to add new treasures to the old.

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Sparkling as is the writing of Dr. Brandes, his conversation is no less so. Indeed, a more entertaining companion can hardly be imagined. He seems to know everything, to have seen everything and in his travels all over Europe he has met most of the great ones of the earth. He talks freely about every subject, casts new light over the most trivial matter, and can, in a few words, give a sketch of this or that famous person.

Stuart Mill, Renan, Ibsen, Max Klinger, Tolstoy, Bismarck ; he will pass in review all such powerful influences of our century. The last name brings him to talk of his long stay in Berlin, and of the old Emperor and his Court, and suddenly he says :

“ I have never felt myself so completely left out in the cold as when at a great Court ball at Potsdam. I was the only one of eleven hundred guests who had no decoration.” With a twinkle in his eye he adds : “ Unless it was when at a big dinner in Switzerland I found myself the only one who was not condemned to death—all the others being Russian and Polish exiles.”

Being an excellent *causeur* it is no wonder that Dr. Brandes has always been a great favourite with women. His mind fascinates them, and they never feel overwhelmed with his knowledge, because he always cares most to try and make them talk about themselves, and he is certainly an artist at that.

That dreadful female monster—if it is proper to call her female—who, two minutes after being introduced, tells one that she wears “ divided skirts ” and starts her day with a brandy-and-soda, has no interest for Dr. Brandes. He combines with his very advanced views in other directions the old-fashioned idea that womanhood still remains the greatest fascination of woman.

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I don't mean by this that he opposes the liberty women nowadays have obtained. Nothing could be further from his mind. He means the two sexes to have equal rights and equal freedom. But he has no sympathy with the woman who, because she works and fights her own battles, must throw to the winds all grace and beauty. For there is nothing book-wormish about Georg Brandes. As a true pagan, he loves to be surrounded by youth and loveliness. There is an old-world tenderness and grace about his bearing towards women, and he belongs to that race of men who, like Bismarck, believe that a man never looks more charming than when reverently bending over a woman's hand.

It need scarcely be said that Dr. Brandes often finds the opportunity to look charming!

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On the 26th of October 1891, it was twenty-five years since he had published his first book. The anniversary was a good opportunity for his friends and followers to honour him. A public dinner was arranged, and in the course of the evening the workmen, the artists, and the students greeted him with torches. The great preparations on the part of his friends, and the complete silence with which the Conservative papers treated the matter, aroused curiosity, and when the evening came all Copenhagen was in the streets to see the procession.

The dinner was given at the Concert Palace, a beautiful rococo building in one of the main streets. On the balcony stood Georg Brandes, surrounded by his nearest friends, while every window in the great building was thronged with festive men and women. In front the big courtyard was filled with the young men carrying torches, and outside on the pavement and down the side streets were thousands of spectators.

It was from this balcony that Dr. Brandes thanked all those
who

who paid him homage—thanked them in words which have never ceased to burn in the memories of those present. Though the wonderful fire of the speech must more or less be lost in translation, I think that even the poorest translation could not fail to convey some of its original poetry and power.

“Thanks for those torches !

“Thanks for lighting them. Thanks for carrying them. May they still blaze, still go on shining—fire in the minds, fire in the wills, blood-red fire burning through life.

“Thanks for those torches !

“Torches in the night mean hope in time of darkness. In the early Christian days they used to be carried on Easter Saturday as a symbol of the Resurrection. May the resurrection of our own time be not too far away.

“I take this fire as an omen. It is good, it is splendid to see workmen, artists, students, all carrying torches together. Let us go on like this, and we will get light.

“No element is so pure as fire. It cleanses the air. May it purify the foul air in this town.

“No element is so gay as fire. It stirs the nerves like music and like wine. May it brighten the minds in this country.

“The light of the torches is as the light of the mind. As rain cannot quench the one, mere words cannot kill the other ; nay, not even a storm of words. The light of thought cannot be quenched, and liberty and justice are the two torches which set each other aflame.

“Thanks for those torches !

“May they shine and warm. May they burn up all lies and conventionalities. May they burn to ashes all the thought-corpses from times dead and gone.

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“Are you tired of carrying torches? Then hand them to the younger generation.

“In Latin the morning star is called Lucifer, which means the light-bringer. Old fathers of the Church, misunderstanding a scriptural sentence, believed, and made others believe, that this spirit of the morning star, this Lucifer, was a demon

“Never believe that! It is the most stupid, the most dangerous of all superstitions. The nation that believes that is lost. Lucifer, the father of fire, the torch-bearer, the flame-spirit, whose symbol is the torch he lifts high in his hand: he is that very spark of life which fires our blood; he is the star of intelligence that makes bright our heaven.

“He is the true angel of light. Never believe that the angel of light has fallen or could fall. It is a lie!

“Thanks for those torches!

“See that they blaze! See that they shine!”

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So did he speak; but what he asked of those young men who, in the dark October night, crowded around him, torches in hand, he himself has fulfilled. Never has his enemy had the strength to snatch the torch from his hand; never has he tired of carrying it high, that it might shed its radiant light over his country and his people.

Thank you, torch-bearer, for the light you gave us!