

# SIDELIGHTS ON NOBEL PRIZE WINNERS

By Annie Russell Marble

"YOU never miss the water till the well runs dry" is an oldtime adage that has many modern applications. It has been recalled this year by the decision of the Nobel Institutes not to award any of the customary annual prizes for achievements in science, literature, and the promotion of peace. (The belated award in physics to Professor Manna Siegbahn of the University of Upsala, although given this autumn, was a prize for 1924, not for the current year.) For twenty four successive years Nobel prizes in several of these fields have been announced in November and awarded on December tenth, the day commemorative of the death of Alfred Bernhard Nobel. The announcements have been awaited with speculative curiosity; they have been received with varied degrees of censure.

In public response, by word and international press, there has been in past years only an occasional note of appreciation either of the adjudicators or of the donor who left the bulk of his fortune of nine millions as a legacy, to be divided among aspiring workers in chemistry, physics, physiology or medicine, literature, and the promotion of world peace — provided the work of outstanding merit had tended "to benefit mankind". Gratitude has been seldom expressed; criticism has flowed freely. The apparent demand this year for the "customary awards" was an insinuation that the Nobel prize money was ours, to be given to our chosen candidates. Dr. Johnson's

words recur to memory, "Gratitude is a fruit of great cultivation; you do not find it among gross people." This year of abstinence from prize giving might be a time for cultivation of that "grace of gratitude" for the more than fourscore awards that have stimulated and rewarded scientific discoveries, literature of "an idealistic tendency", and movements toward world peace.

Many conflicting and disparaging statements have been made about the joint decision of the Nobel Foundation to omit all awards this year. According to the tenets of the will of Alfred Nobel — and the Code of Statutes which was framed in 1900 to interpret and expound the terms of this will — it is decreed that "each of the annual prizes founded by the said will shall be awarded at least once, during each ensuing five-year period" (ensuing, that is, after the first prizes were given in 1901). In Section 5 of this same Code one reads: "If it be deemed that not one of the works under examination attains to the standard of excellence above referred to, the sum allotted for the prize or prizes shall be withheld until the ensuing year."

The first announcement, which was assumed to be official, stated that "the prizes this year would be withheld because of lack of suitable candidates". The outcry was loud and immediate from many sources. The literary journals, in tones of autocracy, asked, "How could there be a lack of 'suitable candidates' when such writers of today as Herr Mann of Germany, Thomas

Hardy of England, Concha Espina of Spain, Sigrid Undset of Norway — not to mention other candidates proposed by academies and universities — were recognized by international critics as superior?" When the hubbub of racial tongues became less insistent, the real reason for the decision was allowed to percolate from the Nobel Institutes to the aggressive public of many lands. The primal cause of the condition, it appeared, was economic: the resources of the Nobel Foundation had been reduced by years of awards, fluctuating incomes during the war period, and progressive taxation. If no time should be allowed for cumulative interest, the original sum of about \$40,000 for each recipient must be reduced to an embarrassing degree. With foresight for such possible crises, the Code had provided that "the award in each section shall under no consideration be less than sixty per cent of that portion of the annual interest that shall be available for the award, nor shall the amount be apportioned to more than a maximum of three prizes".

As a temporary sop to the peevish public that clamors for satisfaction, it has been predicted that in 1926, the twenty fifth anniversary of the first awards, there may be double or divided prizes among different nationalities, with special celebrations. In 1904, the prize in literature was divided between Echegaray of Spain and Mistral of Provence, and in 1909, two noted inventors of wireless telegraphy, Marconi and Braun, shared the money award in physics.

There have been occasional differences of opinion about the prior claims of scientists; but the task of choosing these winners is simple compared with that of finding the writer who shall satisfy the majority of critics. As in other fields whose harvest is rewarded

by the Nobel will, the author shall have produced a work "to benefit mankind". What is the criterion of literature that will answer that demand? Will it not fluctuate with racial standards and individual interpretations? There is little difficulty in obtaining a consensus of approval for such awards in science and medicine as these already made; to Koch, for discoveries about thyroid glands; to Roentgen, for X-rays; to Marie Curie, for discovery and development of radium and polonium; to Sir William Ramsay, for knowledge about gaseous elements; and to the three Americans — chemist, physicist, and physician — Theodore W. Richards, A. A. Michelson, and Alexis Carrel. Few would quarrel with the decisions which favored Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Elihu Root for "the peace prize" for specific influences that tended "to benefit mankind".

When we turn to literature, the divergence of opinion on this qualification is wide. It is even more pronounced regarding the second condition of award: that the prize be given to the writer "who shall have produced the most distinguished work of an idealistic tendency". Both phrases have diverse interpretations, according to individual ideas of what is strictly humanitarian and what is idealistic. Will there ever be accord of opinion about the justice of awards — given these conditions — to Paul Heyse, Karl Gjellerup, Carl Spitteler, Jacinto Benavente? On the one hand, plaudits greeted the honors to Carducci, Kipling, Eucken, Rolland, Tagore, Heidenstam, Anatole France, and Yeats; on the other hand, some of these writers are demoted by certain modernists among critics to the rank of "third rate", imitative producers. Time alone will decide whether books that were especially selected as worthy



*Drawing by Margaret Freeman*

Sigrid Undset

of the prize, like "Jean-Christophe", "Growth of the Soil", and "The Peasants", have had lasting or passing influence upon literature "of an idealistic tendency".

To the credit of the adjudicators be it remembered that the Nobel Institute of the Swedish Academy has created a committee of specialists to confer with the "eighteen immortals" of the Academy who make the final decision. "It is not essential to be a Swedish subject or to be a member of the Corporation that has to make the awards", are the words explanatory of this committee of expert advisers. In 1923 the Nobel Committee specialists were Per Hallström, in German and English literature; Karl August Hagberg, in Italian and Spanish literature; Sven Erik Söderman, in French literature; and Anton Karlgren, in Slavic literature. Looking over the lists of winners in each department, a fair minded reader will be impressed by the absolute lack of favoritism toward Scandinavian scientists or writers — their quota is small. Thus has been fulfilled one of the conditions stressed by the donor of the legacy, that "no consideration of nationality shall prevail". "Why were Ibsen and Strindberg passed by, and Björnson and Selma Lagerlöf chosen for honors?" asks a malcontent who emphasizes, duly, the creative vigor of the realistic dramatists. An amateur opinion would be that Björnson more truly exemplified the humanistic and idealistic qualities. Rumor says that Strindberg was earnestly recommended by certain members of the Swedish Academy but that his own condemnation was found in "The Confession of a Fool" and in his emotional vehemence toward his first wife. "And Tolstoy?" asks another, who complains that "he was consistently ignored for nine years" after the

first awards were made. Authoritative answer, given to the writer of this article, was that the prize was offered to Tolstoy but that he refused it, since he persistently denied to himself all honors and emoluments.

Twenty four names on the roster of fame from 1901 to 1924 in literature, and among them one woman only, Selma Lagerlöf! Such a ratio would not seem unfair in science: Madame Curie is distinctively *the* woman chemist to be honored on that list. And Baroness Bertha von Suttner, by personal activities and her book, "Lay Down Your Arms", deserved the "peace prize" in earlier years. More recently, many Americans have nominated Jane Addams as possible recipient of this honor conferred by the Norwegian Storting.

In modern literature, however, the large proportion of women among eminent writers is recognized everywhere. In some countries the number of women on the lists of literary achievements equals that of men. Selma Lagerlöf, the one woman who captured the Nobel Prize in literature — seventeen years ago — has had no rival. An amusing journalistic mistake had wide credence in recent weeks — namely a syndicated photograph of Miss Lagerlöf, with the caption, "Winner of Nobel Prize in Literature". Confusion and conflict have resulted in many "middle brow minds" and inquiries have come by mail and in print. One persistent correspondent declared: "Selma Lagerlöf might have received the prize a *second* time, mightn't she? Was there any statement in the will to prevent this?" The assertion that no prize in literature was given this year was only partially convincing to this disputant.

Selma Lagerlöf waited for the prize for three or four years after her strong

admirers of many nationalities had stormed the ears and the mail of the Swedish Academicians in her behalf. Rumor persists that Rudolf Eucken, philosopher of idealistic Christianity, was "the dark horse" of 1908 upon whom those who favored Miss Lagerlöf, and those who counseled delay, made their compromise. The reward came to her soon, however, with the approval of readers in many countries, especially in England and America, who knew her earlier books in excellent translations, "The Story of Gösta Berling", "Miracles of Antichrist", and "The Wonderful Adventures of Nils". In the seventeen years since her honor, Miss Lagerlöf has expanded both her gifts and her fame. She is always racial in background of setting and ideas but broadly humanistic in her sympathies, with unquestioned "idealistic tendency" in motive and message. She is busy with her writing and welfare activities. One of her latest novels is now being translated into English by her faithful interpreter, Mrs. Velma Swanston Howard. Several of her stories are shown as films and an opera, adapted from "Gösta Berling's Saga", has recently been given in Milan, with libretto by Rissatto and music by Richard Zandonai.

That Miss Lagerlöf has had no companions among her sex is not due to lack of candidates urged by respective academies, universities, and "learned societies" — candidates must be nominated by such organizations, not by individual boosters. English critics in the press have frequently suggested May Sinclair, sometimes Dorothy Richardson, more recently Sheila Kaye-Smith; Americans have urged Ellen Glasgow, Edith Wharton, and Willa Cather. Critics of Continental fiction have stressed the vigor and dramatic

skill of Concha Espina, author of novels translated as "Mariflor", "The Red Beacon", and others. She belongs to the aristocracy of Spain and has written both verse and prose. Since the death of Countess Pardo-Bazan she has held first rank among Spanish women in literature, and she has been given three awards by the Spanish Academy within the last ten years.

Preeminent among the names heralded by the guessers of the winner for 1925 was that of Sigrid Undset of Norway. She has written what has been fittingly called "an epic of womanhood", entitled in Norwegian "Kristin Lavransdatter". Two parts of this vital tale of Norway of the fourteenth century have been translated into English as "The Bridal Wreath" and "The Mistress of Husaby". Colorful and poetic in its background, it deals with elemental passions and feelings, with tense conflicts between daughter and father, wife and husband. The author, daughter of a noted archaeologist, has been a student and a teacher of history, and as writer she is singularly able to make the past live.

A few months ago it was reported: "There is a feeling in Sweden that the recipients in recent years have treated the honor of the Nobel prizes a little too nonchalantly and that, if they wish to receive their prize, they ought to conform with the rules of the Nobel Institute and appear in person to deliver the lecture which is a stipulated condition" (American-Scandinavian Review, February, 1925). The delivery of a lecture is in the form of a strong suggestion rather than "a stipulated condition", the words reading: "It shall be incumbent upon a prize winner, whenever feasible, to give a lecture on the subject treated of in the work to which the prize has been

awarded, such lecture to take place within six months of the Founder's Day at which the prize was won, and to be given at Stockholm or, in the case of the Peace prize, at Christiania." Reymont was unable to go to Stockholm in 1924 because of the ill health that culminated in his death within a few months. And the other recipient of that year, Professor Einthoven of Leyden, winner of the prize in medicine, was starting upon a voyage to the United States with plans for a course of lectures here.

Other winners in literature within recent years, including Anatole France and William Butler Yeats, have received the honor in person from the King of Sweden. J. Lewis May in his biography of Anatole France relates "the Master's impressions" on this occasion, when he made a daring comment upon the Treaty of Versailles as a futile peace, which caused unpleasant reactions in France and elsewhere. He found Sweden "a charming country"

and added, "No city ever pleases me more than Stockholm." In emphasis of the international value of the Nobel Prize he said, "I am grateful to a jury whose reputation for impartiality is held in such high esteem."

William Butler Yeats, as poet-painter in words, recorded his memories of the days at Stockholm as "A Meditation" (Dial, September, 1924). He delighted in the royal splendor and simplicity combined, in the music, and in the fluent speech of the President of the Swedish Academy. In his official address, on "The Irish Theatre", he paid deep tribute to the cooperation of Synge and Lady Gregory. To this "Meditation" Mr. Yeats gave the title, "The Bounty of Sweden". May it not be a fitting phrase to keep in mind, in appreciation of the high ideals and generosity of Alfred Nobel and the faithful services, for a quarter century, of his trustees, the King of Sweden and the directors of the Nobel Institutes?

## CHROMO TONES

By Cathal Canty

I SHALL not know another day  
As wildly bright as this.  
I shall know all you are too soon  
And I shall miss

The swift delight in catching each  
New sally of your wit,  
For once repeated, I shall have  
No smile for it.

And yet how gaily I would rush  
This vivid hour away  
To trace with you the monotone  
Of days grown grey.