

Karlfeldt, Poet of Sweden

By CHARLES WHARTON STORK

JUST another Nobel Prize winner. One senses the first thought of the average literatus, as Walt Whitman would have called him, on hearing that the Nobel Prize has been posthumously conferred upon Erik Axel Karlfeldt, a Swedish lyric poet. Here is another writer whom nobody has ever heard of and whom nobody outside his own country will hear of very long.

And yet in one respect the present winner was unique. Karlfeldt was the only man to refuse a Nobel Prize. It was first offered to him some ten years ago, but he declined on the grounds that he was unknown outside of Sweden and that the number of Swedish novelists would seem out of proportion, Selma Lagerlöf and Verner von Heidenstam being already on the honor role. Also, as he was of the Swedish Literary Academy which made the award, its dean in fact, his election by his fellow members would be doubly suspect. One begins to divine in this clear-thinking, fame-shy man a character considerably out of the ordinary even among eminent writers.

But Karlfeldt the man interests us at present only as we find him in Karlfeldt the author. How can the English-reading public pass upon his claims to the high honor which he alone declined? A novelist has obviously a much better chance of being read in a foreign language than has a poet. Hardly any modern poetry is read to any extent in English translation, which is a pity. The standard of verse translation has been greatly improved in the past generation; instead of metric paraphrases we have been getting a good many versions that are poems in their own right, that render the original emotion and technique almost, perhaps sometimes quite, at first hand. The assertion may be boldly ventured that if any contemporary poetry can be so rendered into English, it is poetry such as that of Karlfeldt. The idiom of Swedish verse is precisely that of English, and Karlfeldt, being a poet of substance rather than of stylistic novelty, need lose but little of his original vigor and charm.

What has the output of Karlfeldt been? Unlike most poets nowadays, he has written practically no prose. Neither has he attempted any long narrative pieces. He has written only lyrics: lyrics of Swedish nature and peasant life, with a small number of a more personal character. As to form, the sonnet is not in his repertory, and rarely the song. He writes mostly in regular stanzas; of the ten thousand or so lines in his six smallish volumes hardly any are unrhymed. There is often something rather set and measured in his accent.

And yet what a false idea all the preliminary facts are giving! To read Karlfeldt—in his own language, of course—is to live with exquisite intimacy the rich and bracing outdoor life in his native province of Dalecarlia; the region of bright dresses and dark forests; of calm lakes and storm-breeding mountains; of ancient superstitions, droll humor, and strong individuality. The average modern poet takes all his time telling us what he is; Karlfeldt tells us what he sees and does. He is intensely objective. Neither filmy vagueness nor dry abstraction are to his taste. But it is essential to add that, brilliant as are Karlfeldt's surfaces, they are never mere surfaces. He chants in overtones, he opens vistas; if he says much, he makes us dream more.

Let us hear him speak for himself, at least in as far as translation will permit. The opening stanzas of "Mountain Storm" are typical both of his elemental passion and of his artistic control:

*Rough, heavy hands are fumbling at the door,
And shoulders rock the beams with savage glee:
"Out of my path, gray kennel where men flee
While earth's heart quivers to the mid-night's roar!"*

*The trolls, weighed down with silence,
now wax bold
To chant their hell-hymns on the mountain crest.
The dismal clouds rush forth in mad unrest
And sweep the plain with drooping mantle-fold.*

This passage combines very precise and keen observation with an equally remarkable sense of emotional background. Karlfeldt describes only what an average peasant might feel on such an occasion, but he describes it with the inspired imagery of a master. To speak in terms of music, we have here a folk motif developed into a symphonic poem.

For contrast we may take the delicate lines of "The Silent Songs":

*Like the cool of early spring was our love
Ere the joy of earth finds tongue,
Though the spirit divines that the blue above
Is warm with the breath of song.
Like a swan returned from the south, the sun
Sang proud on its flight afar;
And the moon, a cuckoo, when day was done,
Saluted the evening star.*

Here again is freshness of impulse and graceful finality of style. There is "the breath of song" both in first love and in early spring, that sweetness of melodies unheard which was caught by the sensitive ear of Keats. In fact, as one lives oneself more and more deeply into the poetry of Karlfeldt, one has the growing impression that, had the soul of the English poet been transported to Dalecarlia, his pen would have written lines like these.

We may summarize Karlfeldt's personality by saying that he is the highly trained spokesman of a primitive society, a man with the heritage of Burns and the long, careful training of Tennyson. His strength is less in any one poetic faculty than in an even development of all. This makes him less startling on first acquaintance but more delightful on long acquaintance. He stays with one as does the Browning of "Filippo Lippi."

We should not omit to give a specimen of Karlfeldt's more vernacular style. The following is from "Snake Song":

*But now I think of snakes, I mind another
class of beast,
That's twice as false and slippery and
dangerous at least.*

*They say the snake will crouch among the
bushes, and its eye
Can glitter so it fascinates a bird that
comes too nigh.*

*The girl, though, can go anywhere and
shoot her witching glance
Wherever she takes notice of a passing
pair of pants.*

Karlfeldt is in his most characteristic mood when he combines humor with earnest in the series of "Dalecarlian Frescoes in Rhyme." These are poems on native wall paintings, where scenes from the Bible are rendered in terms of the artist's own environment. In "The Assumption of Elijah," for instance, the prophet has "a Sunday hat and leather coat, a stout whip in his hand, and a green umbrella by his knee." Somewhat like the climax of Vachel Lindsay's "General Booth" are the final stanzas describing the heavenly progress of his steeds:

*Fire flashes from their nostrils, fire is in
their muscles, too,
And they gallop through the firmament
so fast
That soon they reach the Milky Way, that
golden avenue,
And near the gates of Paradise at last.*

*Then Our Lord comes out and stands on
the stairway of his hall:
"Thou art welcome, worthy prophet, step
right in!"*

*And he beckons to an angel groom, who
hastens at his call
And leads the sweating chargers to their
bin.*

It is in this combination of sturdy reality and imaginative power that the special charm of Karlfeldt lies. It has already endeared him deeply to his own people, and whatever of his quality can be transmitted through another language should win him a much wider appreciation. The genius of Burns gave universality to Ayrshire, which is a much less picturesque region than Dalecarlia. Conceive the emotions of a Scotchman on hearing Burns alluded to as "just another Nobel Prize winner."

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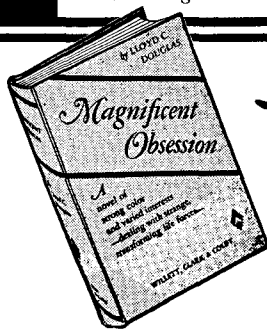
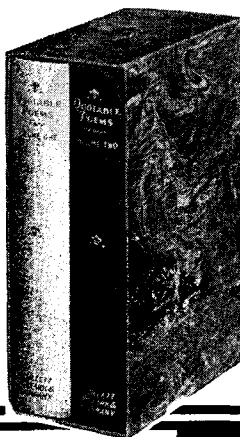
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Points of View

Hatter's Castle

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

I have just read the fourth review of "Hatter's Castle," and am more than ever disgusted with the lack of guts manifested by the present generation of reviewers.

The review I have in mind goes on and on and on about Victorian novels, the fact that the book is too long, that many of the speeches between characters could have been cut down, and finishes by telling us that the book deserves a place alongside "The Old Wife's Tale."

Bosh! There is no comparison to be made. And all this talk about Victorian novels, and the book's being too long, is just a mess of supposedly esoteric tommyrot. Reviewers go in for that stuff about two hundred per cent.

"Hatter's Castle" is the strongest book that has come out of contemporary fiction. And Mr. Cronin comes closer to the genius of Thomas Hardy than any man writing today. He has the same philosophical detachment; the same power of moving prose; the same preoccupation with the tragic aspects of life as the master. He lacks only—or he gains; it all depends on your attitude towards fiction—the coloring of his own philosophy of life. For, so far as he lets you know, he has none. The book is written with the majesty of a god. It depicts a life, and the lives affected by it. That is all. And when that is done as Mr. Cronin does it, completely, richly, fully, then the objective touch in modern literature has reached its highest point. A Hemingway, or a Faulkner, does this kind of thing. But they, and all the minor half-wits that ape them, don't do it ALL. They try to be scientific, and consequently leave out about six-tenths of the picture. Mr. Cronin, on the other hand, gives you the picture with every completeness. You don't see it, you feel it. You feel the full force of the story, the full force of Brodie's madness, the full force of tragedies inspired by his madness. But you don't know what Mr. Cronin feels about it. That, I maintain, is a difficult stunt, and it is the acme of what modern literature tries to attain. The others haven't done it, and in their failure lies our right in insisting that modern literature falls down just because there is none of the author in it. But Cronin shows us our fallacy. His tragedy has the fulness of the Greeks, and but emphasizes the fact that the moderns, could they do what they talk of, wouldn't be so modern after all.

There is but one false touch in the whole book. The happy ending for Mary and the Doctor doesn't belong. Mary has been done with, and would have better returned to London. And the Doctor should have remained the dispassionate creature he has been all along.

Brodie, though, is pictured complete. And, best of all, he is admirable. One feels no pity for him—he is solid, and even the contemptible couple who seem to have bested him would never dare return to his section of England. But all this does not belong here. Better to leave it for the reviewers who look at literature like a scientist looking at a bug, and who find the bug wanting because he isn't as they are. They're the boys for you!

BERTRAM ENOS.

Winnetka, Illinois.

Reference Books

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

Mr. Rollins says (Oct. 3) "there is little question that all reference books should be made as slim as possible," apparently by thin paper. That depends on who is to use the book, and how much. Thin paper is all right for a book to be little used, or for a private shelf where shelf-room is scanty and the book will be used only by a man who knows how to use a book. But if it is an office library and there are in the office thirty people who have nothing in common except the degree of A. B., I know by experience that the paper needs to be stiff. The thin-paper volume, even if it be only a supplement used much less than the main cyclopedia, will be rapidly crumpled into uselessness. For a book very much used, even if used by a careful man, there is the further point that thin paper wastes time in turning the leaves, because the thinner leaves are harder to separate.

As to another aspect of slimness, I am strongly in favor of reducing the number of pages in a book of reference by making the pages large. As far as shelf-room goes the matter may be (to use a not-inappropriate idiom) as broad as it is long; but the fewer the pages, the less of the drudgery of turning leaves to find the right one among so many.

STEVEN T. BYINGTON.

Ballard Vale, Mass.

War Book Reviewing

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

Is it too much to ask that would-be reviewers of war books should occasionally consult J. N. Cru's monumental "Témoins"? If they did, they might disseminate less blatherdash. What are we to think of a reviewer who, just after mentioning Barbusse as an "honestly realistic writer," speaks of a book published in 1931 but "written down . . . in 1917, long before any literary description of actual battle scenes could have gotten into print . . . ?" (Italics mine.) "Témoins" (p.556) could have told this blurbster that "Le Feu" appeared in serial form in *L'Œuvre* beginning with August, 1916, and in a volume in January, 1917. Incidentally, M. Cru has some devastating comments on the "honest realism" of both Barbusse and Remarque. Of another book, seldom mentioned in America, "Jusqu'à l'Yser," by Max Deauville, published in September, 1917, M. Cru has this to say: "Un chef d'œuvre parmi les souvenirs des combattants, aussi bien au point de vue littéraire qu'au point de vue document fidèle." M. Cru elsewhere refers to Deauville as "un des dix meilleurs auteurs de la guerre." How long is our patience to be abused by the proclamation of Barbusse and Remarque as realistic writers of war scenes? If we cannot save the word realistic from Babel, we had best consign it to the scrap pile.

Reed College.

BENJAMIN M. WOODBRIDGE.

James Gates Percival

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

I am writing a biography of the poet-scholar James Gates Percival (1795-1856), generally recognized as the most learned man of his time. As a poet, physician, linguist, and geologist he entered into correspondence with a wide circle of friends. These letters, as well as other Percival MSS and references to him in diaries and letters, I am anxious to examine. Will S. R. L. readers who are acquainted with the location of such materials address me at 1013 Yale Station, New Haven, Conn.?

HARRY R. WARFEL.

John Bailey's Books

To the Editor of *The Saturday Review*:
Sir:

Christopher Morley's mention of John Bailey reminds me that his "Claims of French Poetry" is the best introduction to that whole branch of letters, so derouting to the English mind. He stills the gibes of the partly lettered. Take his book as a text, and as a reader Belloc's "Avril."

MORRIS BISHOP.

Ithaca, N. Y.

On October 23rd and 24th, invited by the University of Virginia, a group of distinguished Southern writers meet at the university for a conference on such problems as the relation between Southern writers and their public, and particular questions relating to Southern literature in its present very interesting stage. Among the writers are to be James Branch Cabell, Ellen Glasgow, DuBoise and Dorothy Heyward, Archibald Henderson, Paul Green, Mary Johnston, Julia Peterkin, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Laurence Stallings, Amelie Rives, Josephine Pinckney, William Faulkner, Emily Clark, Isa Glenn, Cale Young Rice, Sherwood Anderson, and Struthers Burt.

The Editors of the newly organized French Book Club announce that André Maurois, the Comtesse de Chambrun, née Longworth, and Abbé Ernest Dimnet will constitute their selecting committee. The first book will be announced and delivered in the first week of November.