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Hallgrim Petursson.[1]

By the Rev. C. VENN PILCHER, B.D.

NEARLY two hundred and fifty years ago, in a lonely Icelandic farm-house a leper lay dying. Outside the doors of the cottage Nature was lavish in her gifts of beauty. To the west the waters of the Whalefirth widened towards the Greenland Sea and the sunset. To the east they narrowed into a girdle of hill and fell, forming a land-locked bay, scene of exploits told in one of the Sagas of long ago. But within the cottage all was bare and comfortless. The membrane of the primitive window rattled in the autumn wind, while on the wooden locker-bed, built into the wall of the house, amidst the heart-breaking squalor of his disease, the leper lay dying. But look! his lips are moving, and, as we listen, we hear him pour forth in his beautiful language a hymn bright with the deathless hope of Christ's Gospel, glad with the assurance of a speedy release from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. It was the man's swan-song. Not long afterwards, by the quiet hand of death, he gained his heart's desire.

Such must have been, as in imagination we reconstruct the scene from the knowledge at our disposal, the passing of Hallgrim Petursson, the sacred singer of Iceland. It was a notable example of the victory of the spirit over the flesh, of the triumph of the Christian in his hour of deepest physical need. Small wonder that this was the man who, out of his poverty, left to his countrymen one of the most precious legacies which they have ever received—those Passion-Hymns, which Iceland hearts will cherish, as a poet of their own poets has said, "as long as the sun shines upon the cold Jokull."

Hallgrim Petursson was born in the year 1614. His youth was cast in one of the stirring periods of Icelandic history.

[1] From "The Passion Hymns of Iceland," by the Rev. C. Venn Pilcher, B.D. London: Robert Scott. Cloth, 2s. net.

The breath of the Reformation was breathing upon the dead bones and waking them to life. Odd Gottskalksson had published his Icelandic New Testament in 1540, six years before the death of Luther—a version of which Gudbrand Vigfusson could write: "It is well worthy to stand by the side of that of Tyndal or Luther, and higher praise could hardly be given to it." Bishop Gudbrand, of Holar, had brought out his complete edition of the Icelandic Bible in 1584, and was issuing hymns and other religious literature from his press. It was in this bracing atmosphere that Hallgrim spent his early years, his father being sexton of the Cathedral at Holar. Here doubtless were sown in the boy's heart those seeds which later were to bear such abundant fruit.

But the harvest was not yet. Possibly owing to some youthful indiscretion, the young Hallgrim was sent from the school at Holar to Copenhagen. Here, in the great city, the boy's talents were in imminent danger of being lost. But Divine Providence was watching over him. Brynjolf Sveinsson, later to become one of the most famous of Icelandic Bishops, found him in a blacksmith's shop, and with quick eye discerning the gold beneath the grime, put him again to school.

His education in Copenhagen was continued until an event occurred which was to cast its influence over his whole life. It was in the year 1627, the year of Bishop Gudbrand's death, that four ships from North Africa, three of them being corsairs from Algiers, fell upon the defenceless coast of Iceland. The main attack was delivered upon the Island of Heimaey, the chief of the Westman group. The wanton and inhuman atrocities committed by the pirates so burnt themselves into the memory of the unfortunate inhabitants, that Mr. Nelson Annandale relates that during his six weeks' stay at Heimaey, in the year 1898, he heard almost daily of the raid. Between three and four hundred persons were taken captives, chiefly by the Algerians, and sold as slaves in the market at Algiers. Many suffered great cruelty, largely in the form of persecution for their faith. They were "chained in insupportable positions,

beaten on the hands and faces, exposed naked in public places, and again beaten until they lost the power of speech." At length, however, an Icelander was allowed to carry a petition to the King of Denmark, asking for 1,200 rix-dollars as a ransom price for the surviving captives. A subscription was raised in Iceland, to which the King of Denmark himself largely contributed. This was paid over in due course; and in 1637, ten years after the raid, thirty-four survivors out of the hundreds taken were set at liberty.

Some of these people broke their homeward journey at Copenhagen, and here it is that Hallgrim Petursson again comes into the story. During their enforced sojourn in North Africa, these survivors seem to have become more or less infected with Mohammedanism, or at least to have let a part of their Christian faith slip away into the limbo of forgetfulness. It was necessary to remedy this state of things, and to do so an Icelander, learned in Christian truth, but resident at Copenhagen, was needed. Hallgrim Petursson, now a distinguished theological student, fulfilled these conditions, and was forthwith appointed by the authorities to be the religious instructor of his rescued compatriots.

Among the captives was a lady, Gudrid, by name, who by her beauty had already attracted the attention of the son of the Dey of Algiers. The young prince had even wished to marry her. This, of course, could not be tolerated, and the source of temptation was sent out of the country among the other ransomed slaves. Gudrid thus became a member of the group which was confided to the pastoral care of Hallgrim Petursson. It was perhaps not unnatural that he in his turn should become a captive to those charms which had already proved too potent for the Algerian Prince. Such was the infatuation of the unfortunate man, that although Gudrid had been a married woman in Iceland before the raid, and although, for all that was known to the contrary, her husband was still living there, Hallgrim determined to leave Copenhagen and to sail back to Iceland with Gudrid. Upon their arrival in that country they remained

together, and at length, hearing of the husband's death, were married.

This conduct was the great blot upon Hallgrim's life. He did not go unpunished. The sweet fruit became bitter in his mouth. The Mohammedan leanings of his wife were through long years a pain and grief to his sensitive nature. Nor did his conscience keep silence.

> "Lord, I have sown the seed of sin;
> Hideous have my transgressions been"

—so he sings in one of his Passion-Hymns, and it has been thought that the words bear a special reference to this episode of his career. This sin may have been in a sense the *beata culpa*, which, with its attendant remorse, drove him to the Cross for that gift of pardon and renewal, of which he was afterwards to sing so peerlessly to his countrymen.

Hallgrim Petursson was ordained in 1644, and was, in 1650, appointed to the parish of Saurby, on the Whalefirth, in the South-West of Iceland. Here he gave himself largely to the exercise of his poetic gift, writing much religious verse; and it was here that, inspired by the example of Paul Gerhardt in Germany, and of Kingo in Denmark, he achieved his greatest work in the composition of the immortal Passion-Hymns. They appeared in the year 1659, a first copy of the manuscript being sent to the daughter of that Bishop Brynjolf Sveinsson who had formerly befriended him in Copenhagen. But the singer of Christ's Passion was soon himself to pass through a very furnace of affliction. He contracted the dread disease of leprosy. This he bore with exemplary fortitude, and passed away, after a lingering illness, in the glory of an unclouded hope. He died at Ferstikla, near the parsonage of Saurby, in the year 1674.

The Passion-Hymns are fifty in number. They tell the story of Christ's sufferings from the moment when the Master sang the Pascal Hymn with His disciples in the Upper Room until the military watch was set and the seal made fast upon His tomb. Each hymn consists, as a rule, of from fifteen to

twenty stanzas. The poet begins by paraphrasing the Biblical narrative of that incident in the Passion Story with which he is about to deal. He thus accomplishes what is achieved in oratorio by the recitative. He then passes on to meditation, exhortation, prayer or praise. The hymns were written to be sung, generally speaking, to German chorales of the sixteenth century. With these tunes of stately dignity they naturally blend. To sing them to lighter modern airs would jar on the ear as a kind of sacrilege. In fact, to fully appreciate the hymns it is necessary to hear them sung to these slow and majestic melodies from the times of Luther, which give free play and scope to the beauty of the Icelandic vowel sounds.

In former days it was the custom in the scattered farm-houses of Iceland to sing the Passion-Hymns through during Lent. This custom is still to some extent observed—as, for instance, in the chief Icelandic Church in Winnipeg. Nor can a better preparation for Good Friday, the "Long Fast Day," as it is called by the Icelanders, be well imagined. The practice, however, is not as universal as it was, partly owing to the indifference which pervades so much of the modern world, and partly through the prevalence of views in recent years which, as an Icelandic clergyman has pointed out, "must make the Passion-Hymns of Hallgrim Petursson die upon the lips." It is, however, still true to say that this singer of the Cross is the outstanding poet of his people. His hymns have been called "The flower of all Icelandic poetry." He is still sung and quoted with reverence and with affection. He holds his position, we might almost say, as the Shakespeare or the Milton of his native land.

If we seek the reasons for the spell which the Passion-Hymns have cast over the heart of Iceland for nearly two centuries and a half, we shall not have to look far for an answer. It is true that the range of thought is not wide, that the style is sometimes almost irritatingly didactic, and that the charm of colouring from nature through metaphor or simile is conspicuous only by its absence. The Passion-Hymns possess, however,

one mighty secret. In exquisite Icelandic the poet dwells upon the benefits procured for sinful man by Christ's Passion. He isolates (and surely we may forgive him for doing so) each particular suffering which the Redeemer underwent, and shows the gain wrought for man thereby. Was Christ left alone in His hour of need? It was that we might never be forsaken. Was Christ clothed in a robe of mockery? It was that we might be arrayed in a robe of glory. Was Christ hounded to death with the cry of "Crucify Him"? It was that heaven and earth might over us call "peace." Were Christ's feet pierced? It was that the sins of our wayward feet might be forgiven. Was Christ's side, as Adam's, opened? It was that His Bride, the Church, in that healing stream of Water and of Blood, might be born. The Passion of Christ is the adoring poet's theme. Now in homely teaching, now in pathetic prayer, now in rapturous praise, he "placards" Christ Crucified before his countrymen. He raised, as it were, a mighty crucifix of song over Iceland, and thither, for nearly two centuries and a half, the weary and the heavy-laden have turned their eyes. He sang the theme of the ages, and his song has become immortal.

Matthias Jochumsson, the leading poet of modern Iceland, has written a beautiful ode to commemorate the bicentenary of Hallgrim Petursson's death. He therein speaks of him as "the David of this land of Jokulls." He calls him a light "who lightened two centuries." He tells us that from the time when the child first says his prayers at his mother's knee, until the day when as an old man he turns him to his last sleep, it is Hallgrim's hymns which have power to soothe and to heal. And when Matthias Jochumsson is describing in another poem the passing of Gudbrand Vigfusson, the great Icelander of Oxford, he pictures him lying with the Havamal[1] at his head, Heimskringla at his breast, but the Passion-Hymns at his heart. That is their secret. The Passion-Hymns have spoken to the heart of Iceland.

[1] Readers of Longfellow's "Saga of King Olaf," in the "Tales from a Wayside Inn," will need no explanation of these terms.