Scandinavian Imports

MODERN ICELANDIC PLAYS: "Eyvind of the Hills," a drama in four acts, and "The Hraun Farm," a play in three acts. By Jóhann Sigurjónsson. Translated by Henninge Krohn Schanche. American-Scandinavian Foundation; $1.50.

HADDA PADDA, a play in four acts. By Godmundur Kamban. Translated from the Icelandic by Sadie Luise Peller. Knopf; $1.

ARNLJOT GELLINE, an epic ballad. By Björnstjerne Björnson. Translated from the Norwegian by William Morton Payne. American-Scandinavian Foundation; $1.50.

To Americans, Iceland is an object of curiosity rather than of interest. Great nations are like big men: they smile condescendingly upon the little fellows and are inclined to ask them foolish questions. Iceland's claim to world recognition lies wholly in cultural achievements, mostly of a bygone age. Outside of Scandinavia few persons read the old sagas nowadays; and yet they are in our libraries, translated into fine Anglo-Saxon English (so closely related in root and branch to the Old Norse), the work of such poets and scholars as William Morris, Sir George Dasent, Frederick York Powell, E. Magnusson, and Dr. G. Vigfusson.

There are few nations that can point to a brighter record of culture than this little nation of 100,000 people, practically isolated on their arctic island for nearly one thousand years. Why did they not revert to barbarism, as has been the fate of many white groups out of touch with outside civilization? There is but one answer: the Promethean flame which kindled the genius of the old, now nameless, monks—the saga authors—has never died in Iceland. It could not die so long as the sagas lived, firing the spiritual life of the nation. Each period of national prosperity since the saga age has seen a revival of literary activity. Now Iceland is more prosperous in a material way than ever in its history, and behold there is a pen scratching in every cottage; there is a poet apostrophizing every waterfall, dedicating the summer crop of poppies and daffodils, and charming or at least trying to charm the innumerable host of fays and light-elves, trolls and watersprites and "landvaettir" which have endowed the bleak hills and mountains of Iceland with an immortal soul.

And the firstlings of Iceland's latest literary revival have taken wings overseas to this Vineland of Leif and Thorfinn. Not that we are so fortunate as to have secured translation of

any of the beautiful lyrics, which (it seems to me) Icelandic poets have been singing from time immemorial. The imports are of sterner stuff, better suited to literary baggage-smashers. They are plays, only three in number, and one of them, "Hadda Padda," somewhat damaged in transit.

The other two—"Eyvind of the Hills" and "The Hraun Farm," by Jóhann Sigurjónsson—are living proofs, if proofs be needed, that the creative genius of the saga skalds still lives in the little arctic island. But I imagine that the shades of the saga authors may frown on "Eyvind of the Hills." Eyvind himself, and especially his consort, Halla, are bona fide Norse figures, personifying the weakness and epic strength of saga characters. But in construction the play is an ugly duckling. It is more like a Greek tragedy than anything Scandinavian that I have read. Sigurjónsson might never have read a line by Ibsen or Strindberg. There is not a mustard seed of a sermon text concealed in "Eyvind of the Hills." But it has life, naked life; and because Sigurjónsson is a poet and an artist, his work is endowed with grace, strength, and beauty. No puppets are in his shop. You feel no curiosity about peering behind Eyvind or Halla for props and strings. Here are no new social lessons, no modern philosophy—except, of course, what few items one might garner from a faithful presentation of life.

The action takes place in Iceland, about the middle of the eighteenth century. Eyvind, a handsome, attractive youngster, driven by hunger to commit a theft, becomes the victim of cruel eighteenth century justice, breaks jail, and turns outlaw. He leaves his mountain refuge in search of human companionship, and under the assumed name of Kári finds service on the farm of Halla, a wealthy young widow. They fall in love, and when the law traces Eyvind to Halla's home, she sacrifices her estate, her comforts, and the respect of the community to flee with her outlaw lover to the mountains.

There follows a period of idyllic freedom. Halla bears children. But the law still trails them—the law written in the statute books—and by and by the unwritten runes of human existence begin their pincer-like movement. Halla and Eyvind have no mountains above the mountains to which to flee from forces operating with deathlike sureness within their souls. It is here that Halla emerges as the central figure of the drama. Intensely feminine and yet an Amazon of strength and courage, she seems so clean and healthy morally that even her sacrifices of her offspring to save her lover stand out merely as convincing reactions. She simply fights and sacrifices till she is crushed, and she is crushed only when Eyvind's love, the sole fortress on which her life is based, fails. They are starving in their mountain hut when she discovers that Eyvind is really of base metal; that he has always been afraid to steal, afraid to kill, and now is afraid of Hell. This is what he has to say to Halla:

"You are homely. . . Your face makes me think of a dead horse. May I feel of your hair if it does not all come out?"

Mouthing these words, he turns to his Bible, advising Halla to seek God's help and mercy. Gudrún or Bergthóra or any other grand dame of the sagas might have answered just as Halla does:

"I want no mercy any more, but you can go on calling for help. I am sure He will hear you, if He is not too busy breaking up the glaciers or cleaning out the gorge of a volcano to make it belch more fire. . . . I have but one sole wish before I die, and that is to do some unheard-of cruel thing. I should like to be a snowslide. I would come in the dead of night. It would be a joy to see the people, half naked, running for their lives—chaste old maids with gouty hips, and smug peasant women with bellies bobbing with fat."

This pagan woman, "never able to tell my soul from my love," continues:

"I once dreamed of two people. To them their love was their one and only law. When they lived a long life together—Hunger drew near to the fine web that time had woven between them and would tear it asunder. Then they looked into each other's eyes and together they walked out into the snowstorm to die."

But Halla had to walk out into the snowstorm alone.

"The Hraun Farm" is a pleasant little dramatic idyl of present-day country life in Iceland. The theme, familiar in all literature, is the struggle between a man and a maid and the patriarchal parent of the maid who demands the right to shape her life that she may continue his life work, cultivate and enlarge the dear family estate, and rear a future generation of farmers.

These two plays are splendidly translated by Mrs. Schanche and, strange to say, both rather seem to have improved in the translation. I suspect the improvement is largely due to the fact that both plays have been trimmed of some useless lumber in the course of their preparation for the German and Scandinavian stage.

Which is more than one can say of "Hadda Padda," by Godmundur Kamban. The play itself is a distinctly worthy piece of dramatic art, poetic and tense, and in Hadda Padda, the

heroine, we have another decent copy of the saga figures in modern life. They might do worse, these Icelandic dramatists, than to continue their worship of their classics. "Hadda Padda" lacks smoothness in the translation. The lines are clumsy here and there, and the one or two lyrics are lame; but the original substance is there.

Both these Icelandic dramatists are young men. Kamban is under thirty; and his play, written when he was twenty-three, is a remarkable piece of work for a man of that age. Sigurjónsson was making a grand failure of studying how to become a horse doctor when Björnstjerne Björnson and Georg Brandes discovered his first attempts at playwriting and advised him to confine his equestrian attentions to old Pegasus.

Björnson's heroic ballad, "Arnljot Gelline," is pronounced by Hjalmar Hjört Boyesen and other Scandinavian critics as constituting, together with the saga trilogy "Sigurd Slembe," the highest achievement of Björnson in his reconstruction of Norway's heroic past. Dr. Payne has caught Björnson's fiery spirit and something of that eternal boyish leap and gallop which characterizes the great Norwegian's literary stride: Björnson seldom walks in prose or verse. But "Arnljot Gelline" and "Slembe" as well are so intensely national, so Norse in flesh and spirit, and so much of a former age that they are not likely to offer competition in popularity with Björnson's "Happy Boy," "Arne," "Synnöve Solbakken," and other tales of peasant life —that is, not outside of Scandinavia. Arnljot's tale is that of a robber, a noble freebooter, and the ballad is full of the thunder of battles—battles with human foes, human passions, the elements. The old Norsemen cared not what they fought so long as the foe was valiant and worthy of their steel. Gelline would tackle a blizzard or the sea, or abduct a maiden, or cleave an enemy's skull with equal zest in the work at hand.

With the exception of "Hadda Padda" we are indebted for all this worthy reading to the American-Scandinavian Foundation, one of the most useful literary institutions of the United States. The Foundation has yet to produce a mediocre volume. But consider its field. Its translators have not even approached the lean streak in Scandinavian letters. They are still picking gold nuggets, nor need they worry about the immediate future.

JOHN G. HOLME.