

WISE KNUT.

BY THE EDITOR.

FOLLOWERS of Mrs. Eddy, mental healers, and believers in the mysteries of spiritual phenomena, call their views "New Thought," but Mr. Bernard Stahl finds that kindred experiences were known and recorded long before Christian Science existed. He offers to the English speaking world the translation of a little book written by the late Björnstjerne Björnson,¹ the famous Norwegian poet, in which the story is told of a poor neglected boy who suffered in childhood from epilepsy and heard voices, and who as he grew older was looked upon by his neighbors as a God-inspired seer. He was called Wise Knut.

The story of Wise Knut is remarkable but contains nothing that is miraculous or incredible. It is obviously a faithful record, perhaps now and then exaggerated but upon the whole trustworthy. The failures of the seer are mentioned but not made as prominent as they ought to be in a scientific investigation. However, we can recommend the work as an instance that shows how belief in the supernatural originates.

Björnson's knowledge of Wise-Knut was not at first hand. He owes it to another Norwegian author, Johannes Skar, who wrote in the peasants' dialect and not in the literary language of Norway. Björnson says of him (pages 23-24) :

"The author of this book was born of peasants but he was a man of classical education. His name was Johannes Skar and he was brought up so to speak on the strange stories related of Wise Knut. He traveled over a good deal of the country in order to search for evidence and make personal investigations, and it is safe to say that he never gave up or contented himself until he had found those who had been in personal contact with the famous seer.

"Johannes Skar very often spoke with Knut himself. He lived here at Svastum in Gausdal—only a few miles from my own estate—and many of the

¹ Björnstjerne Björnson, *Wise-Knut*, transl. by Bernard Stahl. New York, Brandu's [1909].

stories here related I've heard myself, some from the very first source and some more from the second or third, and from my very childhood indeed I've been told stories similar to those related by Johannes Skar without being able to enter into any investigations. But this has been done by Johannes Skar, and, of his ability, good intention, and love for truth there is not the slightest doubt."

Björnson says of Wise-Knut (page 69) :

"He believed that his strange abilities were given him as a gift from God, that God in every case 'used him' as his tool. He said, 'The prophets have had it like myself.'"

Knut's abnormal sensitiveness appears from the fact that he could not touch gold, silver nor copper without feeling pain. People came to consult him whenever they were in trouble, when a cow was lost, when they intended to dig wells, when they wanted to know of a medicine for their illnesses, or when they needed advice of any kind. On the spur of the moment he could give them answers, saying that the cow would come home, that she had only lost her way, that she had fallen down a cliff, or whatever he thought had happened, and frequently he hit it right.

It is said that Knut often felt bored when people came to consult him. On page 103 it is stated that he said, "Those people will never let me alone, I've no peace."

Björnson records many remarkable answers which Wise-Knut gave but he does not conceal the failures. On page 103 he writes: "Nor did he always 'receive' messages or was he 'told' what to do. Many were those who sought his help in vain and had to leave as ill and troubled as they arrived." Again (page 116) :

"If any one asked Knut the reason for those failures and mistakes, he would answer, 'I can't say more than what is whispered into my ear,' (It was always through the 'ear' he received his messages) 'and,' he commonly added, 'I'm told that what I say is usually true.' In this he was right; what he said was indeed found to be 'usually true.'"

If we consider that these are second-hand statements, we shall understand that Knut's case was not extraordinary. His failures are explained by Björnson in this way (pages 118-119) :

"In my heart of hearts I've a suspicion, however, that his failures were all results of a surpassing goodness. He would attempt to go farther than was possible in trying to help persistent people, many from far districts and lands; and he couldn't 'find things' when he was tired out or when he was suffering from harsh weather.

"His excuse for not being able to help was always the same, 'God is punishing me.' He bore all adversity and ridicule in this simple patient way.

"But he wasn't scorned by any except those who didn't know him. Those

who associated with him were *all*, believers or non-believers, his reverent friends, with full trust in his honesty and in his wonderful gift."

Wise-Knut was born and brought up in a poor mountain district on one of its very poorest farms; to quote Björnson' (page 13) :

"Knut was not like other children. Far from it. He was often very sick, and suffered intensely from the falling-sickness (epilepsy) and for that reason was unable to take part in the hard farm work or in fact do anything at all. Nor could he be taught to read except by listening to the other children. But the teacher soon took a liking to this strange ailing boy, with big sparkling and strongly squinted eyes, a defect, however, which only gave an added impression of something strange and absent. It happened quite often that Knut suddenly fell down from the school-bench and lay for a long while entirely unaware of himself and his surroundings. His schoolmates saw something quite supernatural in him.

"The falling-sickness, however, became less pronounced as the boy grew up."

Mr. Stahl accompanies his translation with a picture of Knut which, however, is wisely hidden within the bulk of the text between pages 64 and 65. As a frontispiece he offers the vigorous features of the venerable Björnson. The portrait of Wise-Knut shows enough pathological traits to arouse our compassion, not our admiration, and it takes a strong faith in the supernatural to regard this countenance as that of a prophet. The portrait, though crude, is probably faithful in all particulars, and we can only add that there is no idealizing about it.

It is but natural that the opinions of Wise-Knut's contemporaries differ greatly. We learn that some looked upon him simply as an epileptic, while others had an implicit faith in him as a truly god-inspired man. But one thing must be stated in his favor. He never traded upon the belief of the people for pecuniary gain. He never demanded money for advice given or for cures effected. This disarmed his enemies who otherwise might have taken the opportunity to sue him for practising medicine without a diploma. Once, however, he was arrested and suffered undeserved persecution on account of a disturbance which he caused in his harmless zeal in the little village church, but the officers who had to remove him were positively in danger from the threatening attitude of his followers. They escaped rough treatment only by Knut's patience and love of peace. Among the indignant populace was a giant of unusual strength who begged Wise-Knut for the privilege of liberating him and retaliating upon the guards according to their deserts, but Knut quieted him down and order was preserved.

Knut was of a religious disposition which (page 16) "made him trust in God and lean upon Him as his only support."

"During this sickness he was a defenceless prey to perpetual intoxications of the senses. After days of fainting spells he became at last calmer and then he could hear harps playing in the air (compare Ibsen's 'The Masterbuilder'—Hilde's repeated talk about harps playing in the air) and the singing of hymns. Later he heard music played on violins and clarinets, sweeping along the floor as though it came from the earth itself, accompanied by a choir of heavenly voices. Finally the music rose up towards the skies—and faded into silence.

"Later on he was able to apprehend and understand a few words of the hymns. The form was very simple and the object was to tell him that he should throw away all witchcraft, and trust in the medicament of his God which was the 'flesh and blood of our Lord.' The hymn ended with these lines,

'If sickness, dread and pain thou fear
Then sin from heart and soul first tear.'

"It is to be noted that the hymns he then and later 'heard' were sung in the general written language of the country, while Knut himself to his death spoke the dialect of the parish only, a dialect which differed a good deal from the common language."

In comment on this remark of Björnson we have to say that the religious hymns of Norway are all written in literary language and not in any dialect. Since we must assume that this hearing of voices is an echo of Knut's memories, it is but natural that the hymns he heard were sung in the same language with which he was acquainted. The hearing of voices, as well as other hallucinations, is a common occurrence in epileptic subjects, and unless the patient is of a scientific education it is but natural that he will attribute an objective significance to these phenomena.

The translator of the book believes in telepathic communications and spiritual phenomena though he suggests as a possible solution, "that the apparent mysteries of spiritualism and spiritual manifestations are nothing more or less than mysteries of the human nervous system." But whatever the author's motives, we recommend his enthusiasm for "making this interesting book available to the American reader" (page 8).