

A CENTURY OF IBSEN

BY HENRY CHARLES SUTER

ONE hundred years ago, there was born in a Norwegian town an "infant crying in the night" who grew to be a writer, but not one "with no language but a cry." For it has been well cited that Henrik Ibsen became the apostle of those who insist on self-realization and self-expression. In those days Ibsen sensed a devotion to formulas that fostered the use of fantastic phrases that possessed little positive potency. Crowd psychology took the place of individual thinking, and concerted action was more active than careful deliberation.

Echoes multiplied by artifice were glorified as public opinion; mathematical arrangements of votes contrived in consequence, a mechanical conception of society; and ultimately humanitarianism displaced humanism. Ibsen pilloried all this and made his appeal to those who were willing to pay the price of straight thinking.

Ibsen owed little to life's circumstances of lowliness, since his father became insolvent ere he reached the age of eight. So his youth was spent in studying poetry to relieve the monotony of apprenticeship to an apothecary. In his twenties he was aiding the management of the theater of Bergen, his home town, but the chief outcome was that comradery critics caused him to witness drama in larger cities. Before he had seen one play produced, he had written several himself, although these are not found among those preserved for us. The wretched attic in the *Wild Duck* was conjured up in his memory from childhood; when nearly forty he was often unable to buy stamps to dispatch his manuscripts; and even at successful maturity, a "poet's pension" arrived changing need into frugal comfort.

Meanwhile Norway, severed from Denmark in the Napoleonic

age, had a native culture which was considered crude, though confident, in the face of the Danish tradition. Sentiment served instead of sensible thinking, hence Ibsen laughs at the "League of Youth" and at all the fickle elements which compose the "compact liberal majority." In *The Pillars of Society* we see social order based on competitive business, which competition is cited as fraud in its hidden factors, and the conventions thereof as a sham. The pillars of Society are shaken, but society goes on, since its pillars rest on sounder supports and eternal elements in human life.

Sagas of the Norse people provided Ibsen with his subjects for some early plays, since we see something stupendous in the *Vikings at Helyeland*, but the energy is not equalled by the art. Interest was awakened; unity maintained; but the whole enterprise is made to miscarry because of a little lie at the principal point of the plot. All Europe sat up shortly afterwards to wonder at *The Pretenders*, a portrayal of the human stuff of which kings can be made. Earl Skule has been regent during the childhood of Haakon, his nephew, and is reluctant to yield to the adult king. He can put on the king's crown and mantle; but "the king's life task is not his but Haakon's." The constant memory of this haunts him, while a contrary assurance gives Haakon insight and sureness. Cleverness is crucified since it fails before character. But when the war is over and Skule is slain, Haakon tells the secret about his uncle—"He was God's stepchild," suggesting that he was all but the very highest.

The Prussia of Bismarck was meanwhile invading and annexing Danish provinces, and Ibsen entered Copenhagen just as word came of the decisive defeat. He knew that the result was accomplished by Sweden and Norway holding aloof. Scornful of his people and bitter over his poverty, he turned to Italy for cheap living, and thence uttered the protest of his soul in *Brand*. Then it became clear that a prophet had indeed arisen. A Lutheran priest of great scholarship happens, during a vacation tour, to see distribution of food to a famine stricken community. Beyond the fiord, lashed to fury by the storm, lies a man half dead by a wound self-inflicted in despair. Who will carry religious comfort? Brand will go if a boat be available, but what boat can live in such a sea? Brand can navigate if some one will bale the boat to keep her afloat. Two lovers stand in the crowd, and when the man refuses to share the risk, the girl leaps forward. In such a situation Brand found

his soul-mate, his wife, and his parish. From such a sunless valley where Brand buries first his child and then his wife, he will not retire, but spends his life in one struggle with the sordidness of peasantry, and the vulgarity of voluptuous officials. At length, disgusted with it all, he calls his people to follow him to the ice-capped summits where alone one can find a sanctuary worthy of God. But nature rejects him; the avalanche sweeps down; Brand is overwhelmed; yet a voice is heard, "God is Love." Brand was merciless on himself and stern with others, even like the Master; but what a certainty in his creed, and a solid security in religion for his soul.

The next year a wealth of imaginative creation gave birth to *Peer Gynt*. Based on Norwegian legend, Peer is seen as the reckless youth; careless of honor; and ruthless in indulgence, and even when wealth comes his heartless indulgence increases. At last, returning to Norway, he is shipwrecked on the shore, and, like Jacob, comes to his home stripped of all he possessed. In the woods he discourses with a wild onion—a model of himself—nothing but one coat over another, no heart or core to be found. Two figures crowd on him. One demands his destruction as worthless, without character of any kind, good or evil; while the other calls him to the sulphur pits that a life basically sound may be purged of its dross. Dreading each doom in turn, Peer sees an open door and, entering the hut, is welcomed by Solveig, the girl whom he had deserted forty years before. With clamorous demands from those outside for a list of his sins, Solveig mothers the stricken man, assuring him that he has lived all these years in her hope; in her faith; in her heart. Redemptive suffering defies judgment and doom; vicarious sacrifice closes such a career with a song; and Peer finds salvation as Solveig soothes him to sleep.

In *A Doll's House* Ibsen reveals domestic tragedy even in comedy as he shows the futility of the conventional training of women to be mere dolls. But *Ghosts* went beyond the joke and in the story of inherited disease that haunted this young man's mind, Ibsen showed that the time had come when the conspiracy of silence must yield to a decision for discussion.

This leads us to the eternal question as to whether the truth should always be told. In defense of such, Ibsen published *An Enemy of the People*, in which a medical man is acclaimed for suc-

cess in discovering that his civic water supply is tainted. But presently house-holders and business men silence him lest the tourist trade should fall off. One by one those who applauded fall under the control active behind the smug conventions. When, penniless and homeless, the doctor has only his daughter to befriend him, he is proud of the part he has played; spurns the sacrifice; and revels in a freedom of a remarkable satisfaction. The other side, however, to all this is seen in *The Wild Duck* where a whole social group becomes wrecked, because some one, infatuated with veracity rather than with truth, feels bound to break some happy illusion which alone makes life tolerable, and we are made to wonder whether Ibsen turns to criticise himself, or perhaps he merely panders to what the public persistently demands in plays.

When Ibsen was nearing the sixties, and crying for deliverance, he seemingly wonders whether one can start afresh when old and escape the taint of heredity and the grip of social codes. We see "Hedda Gabler," who, after her marriage, remains primarily the daughter of General Gabler, rather than the wife of her uninteresting husband. Still will she realize herself, and when this is found impossible, surrender is avoided by suicide. Again in *Little Eyolf*, Ibsen drowns a boy rather than leave him to be made conformable to his mother's ideas—she dresses him in soldier clothes, though he is a cripple—and to his father's ambition to reproduce in the son a scholar like himself.

In the closing decade of the century Ibsen gave out his *Master Builder*. Here is the conflict of two generations; but the younger generation comes to Solness in three forms: as his own earlier life coming back, as the pressure of a younger artist displacing him as he had displaced the father, and as the nine dolls lying in an empty nursery since his wife lost her babies in a fire which Solness had planned to achieve other ends. He used to build churches to the honor of God but had told God one day that he was through. Then he built homes for human comfort and found it unsatisfying. He proposes now to build "castles in the air." What has wrought the change but the return to him of Hilda with whom, while a mere child, he had flirted that day he turned from God? Now she drives him on to build her one castle with a spire and to crown it as of old with a wreath. But he has lived so long on low levels that he can no longer stand at the height. He climbs and falls to

the pavement—dead. He could seek to regain the past but alas had to die in the effort.

Ibsen scorned middle class conventions, and if we would understand our own young people it may be worth while to see what Ibsen saw, even if we finally reject his judgment. Some aspects of Puritanism call for compensation in creative art and creative ways of life, and the way out of that life which Ibsen pictured as stunted is not easy nor is it readily found, but Ibsen found his task and toiled at it like a master, and for this generation, at least, his voice will not cease to echo, while there be many modern writers who are about to die, and should therefore at least, salute him.

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Published at the beginning of JANUARY, APRIL, JULY, OCTOBER

Each number consists of about 192 pages, contributed by authorities in their respective subjects. Illustrated. 6s net. Annual Subscription, including postage, 25s, 6d.

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