

"HE CHANGED THE WORLD"

St. John Ervine Discusses Henrik Ibsen

IF I were asked to name the greatest dramatic poet since the time of Shakespeare, I should answer, "Henrik Ibsen," who was born in Norway in 1828 of mixed German, Norwegian and Scottish origin. My reply would not depend on anybody's liking or disliking of Ibsen's work. A man's worth is not to be measured by his popularity. It may, indeed, be better measured by his unpopularity. Too many people are popular and wrong. Ibsen was never popular. He is not popular now. But he changed the world. The drama was never the same after it had felt his influence. Like the majority of great dramatists, he came from a small country. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes were Greeks; Shakespeare came out of Elizabethan England, which had fewer inhabitants than London before the war; Goldsmith, Sheridan and Bernard Shaw were born in Ireland; Ibsen was a Norwegian. The big nations of the world would do well, sometimes, to remember the undischARGEABLE debt they owe to small nations.

Ibsen, I say, was born when Queen Victoria was nine years old. He died in 1906, five years after her death. A survey of the drama, particularly in Great Britain, as it was in 1828 and as it was in 1906, is sufficient to show how profound his influence was. It was trivial and vapid when he was born: it was serious and adult when he died. And he, more than any other man, changed its state. He was not, any more than John the Baptist, the sort of person who is likely to be popular. Even when his greatness was acknowledged, and he was received with such deference that when he entered a cafe in Oslo, which was then called Christiania, the people present spontaneously rose to their feet and stood until he had seated himself, he still was not a popular man—as his great rival and friend and sometime enemy, Bjornson, was popular.

Treated with Contempt

All men of genius pass under a cloud and are, for a while—usually soon after their death—not only neglected, but positively despised. Tolstoy is said to be the world's greatest novelist, and his novel, *War and Peace*, is acclaimed, a

little shrilly, as the world's greatest novel. I do not share that opinion, which is based, I think, on pacifist propaganda rather than on literary judgment. But that is immaterial at the moment. What is material is that for a period after the downfall of Tsardom, which he, more than any single individual, had brought about, Tolstoy was belittled by young Russians; and I suspect that his greatness is more generally conceded in this country to-day than it is in his own. I may, perhaps, add here that Tolstoy thought Ibsen immoral and degenerate, and that Ibsen thought Tolstoy a fool.

Henrik Ibsen was not a likeable man. Small in stature, grim in appearance, timid in manner, shrinking from society, unable to impress people by his personality, he was, one may say, destined to develop an inferiority complex, if I may use the jargon of the psychoanalysts. But his early circumstances had helped to make him what he was, or rather, since our character is in us from the start and is not stuck on to us in the course of time, its development was assisted by his early experience.

Family Fortunes in Eclipse

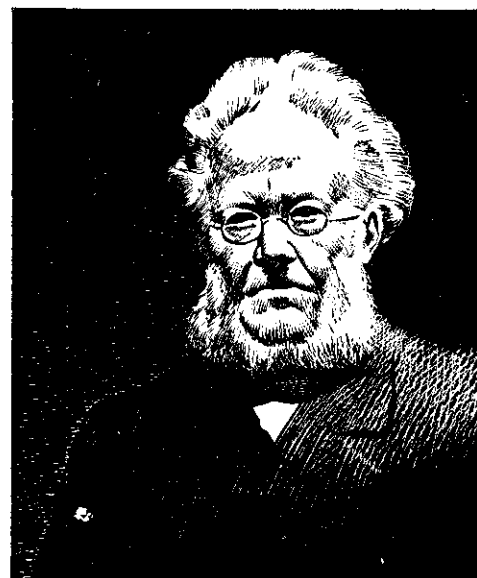
He was born of upper middle-class people, sea-captains and successful merchants, and his father, Knud Ibsen, was a well-to-do merchant, a man of sociable habits, witty, acidly witty at times, and fond of good living, who took to speculation and prospered at it until, in 1836, when Ibsen was eight years of age, a change in the direction of British trade ruined Knud and reduced him to poverty. The change was too much for him. He took to brandy and increased the acidity of his wit. In a small community of four thousand inhabitants, most of them highly puritanical in character, a man is likely to lose his popularity by what he says more than by what he does; and Knud Ibsen said and did everything that could cost him approval. He pricked all the balloons, and he drank. His family, which had held a high place in Skien, soon dropped to a very low one; and the young Ibsen, who had expected to follow a fine career in easy circumstances, found himself following a poor one in very hard circumstances. His disposition was like his mother's, reclusive, and after his father's financial and moral downfall, her nature prevailed in him. It was not a cultured family. Men of genius seldom

come from cultured families. They seem, as the biologists say, to be "sports," born in reaction against their kindred.

This poet, this seed sown on sony ground, was at the most impressionable period of his life, suddenly reduced to a mean and ignominious position in the town where he had lived in affluence and authority. He was sent not to the school to which he felt entitled to go, but to a poor one, two miles along a muddy road from his home; and the dejection he felt in this school with a small and restricted curriculum, caused him to despise his father, the cause, he thought, of his humiliation. His solitary nature, oppressed by poverty, made him withdraw from the normal associations of childhood, and, except for the society of his sister Hedwig, he kept no company. When he was 15, he left his home, now hateful to him because of his drunken father, his silent and puritanical mother, his uncouth brothers, and his poverty, and went to a town even narrower and more money-minded than Skien. This was Grimstad, whose name, in English ears, has a forbidding sound. It was then in the throes of acute speculation in ships. In this small, uncivilised town, remote and almost inaccessible, Ibsen became, like Keats, an apothecary's assistant. His ambition had been to become a painter. He was ill-paid and ill-fed, so poor that in the cold Norwegian winter he sometimes walked the streets without an overcoat, without underwear, even without socks. He had no company of his own kind.

The whole of his life was a fight against his conditions, and he fought this battle with the least and worst equipment. When, eventually, he came to a university, he found his best friend in Bjornson, another dramatic poet of genius; but Bjornson had all the qualities and equipment which Ibsen had not. He was tall and confident and popular. He won prizes and favour. He got what he wanted: Ibsen did not. These two men were rivals. They were friends, but they quarrelled and were often estranged. There was a period when they did not meet for 20 years. Ibsen called Bjornson a weathercock and put him, unfavourably, into a play called *The League of Youth*, offending him deeply. Bjornson said that Ibsen was not a man; he was only a pen. When statues of them both, Ibsen looking down, Bjornson looking up, were unveiled before the National Theatre in Oslo, they were on such bad terms that their friends had to keep them apart and maintain a fiction to each that the other was not present. Yet these two men loved each other. Ibsen asked Bjornson to be godfather to his only son, Sigurd, and Sigurd eventually married Bjornson's daughter. When, on Ibsen's 75th birthday, Bjornson called on him. Ibsen put his arms around him and exclaimed, "I have always loved you most of all!"

In that little town of Grimstad, Ibsen learnt his lessons, and he repeated them



IBSEN: A scraperboard drawing by Russell Clark

in his plays. All that the small, dark-haired, dour-looking apothecary's boy saw and heard as he carried his potions about the town, came into his work; and all that he endured there shaped his individualism and made him determined on one supreme desire, that man should, above all things, be free. That was the note of his work: individual liberty. Every man had a right to his own life, and a right to express his own views. He must not be overborne by the community, nor made obedient to bureaucrats. Each of us is unique. That was Ibsen's belief. You will find it, pushed to extremes, in all his plays and poems, and he demands that a man shall fulfil himself even to his own detriment and danger. It is our duty to seek the truth, but we shall not find it unless we realise that truth itself is continually changing. "A normally-constituted truth," he makes Dr. Stockman say in *An Enemy of the People*, "lives . . . 17 or 18 years; at the outside, 20; very seldom more. And truths so patriarchal as that are always shockingly emaciated; yet it is not till then that the majority takes them up and recommends them to society as wholesome food." Truth is, then, he goes on to say, "like rancid, mouldy ham, producing all the moral scurvy that devastates society."

He Died Protesting

This timid and fearful man was all his life a fighter. How could he be popular who was always at odds with people? Yet this Ishmael, unable to live in his own land for long periods, changed his world, the world to which he never became reconciled. He died protesting. His last articulate word was a contradiction of opinion, and he was right. In his old age, half-paralysed and suffering from amnesia, he was found one morning by his son, Sigurd, learning his alphabet, which he forgot almost as soon as he had learnt it. "See what I am doing," he said, as he sat at the table, where he had composed so many powerful plays, "I am sitting here, learning to make my letters. Learning my letters—I who was once an author!" But did that matter then? He had changed his world.

(From the BBC "Listener")

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any of the moral deterioration we have witnessed during this century. Convincing, and at the same time alarming.

It confronts us with the question of how to equalise the present psycho-physiological situation. It is a variation of the old problem of how to get the lion to lie down with the lamb, to their mutual advantage. Unquestionably things will go from bad to worse if somatotonics cannot learn to live tolerantly, not to say appreciatively, with cerebrotonics, and cerebrotonics with viscerotonics, and so on.

In what, by evolutionary estimation, is a brief span, men have invented a surprising number of reasons for going

to war. Wars of religion, wars for dynastic reasons, wars for party reasons, and of course wars for economic reasons. In the future will there be wars for reasons of temperament? It sounds fantastic, but so, in retrospect, does waging war to settle some theological difference of opinion.

Dr. Sheldon, whether or not it comes to anything, has provided us with a new motive of dispute. He has set up a novel balance of power. He has called three armies to their respective colours. As a cerebrotonic I am tempted to turn traitor and join up with the somatotonics. Am I right in thinking that the victory would be theirs? Am I not allowing myself to be blinded by science?