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To Norway

WE recall on other pages in this issue the contribution of Norway to drama, literature, and music; its fame in polar exploration; and its humanitarian work among the refugees of the last world war. Here we draw attention to its contribution to the art of living.

It must be remembered that nature gave Norway almost nothing to begin with but physical beauty—mountains and forests, rivers, lakes, and moors, but hardly any soil. Even where the soil is sufficient for cultivation, the sunshine is insufficient to guarantee the harvest. Grain crops are grown, but never in sufficient quantity to meet domestic needs; and the growing, ripening, and harvesting, when allowance has been made for the midnight sun, would make a New Zealand farmer sick with worry. Tasks that take a day here take a week there, where every week is precious; but in spite of such handicaps Norway, until the other day, was a prosperous, contented, and truly civilised democracy whose people had come to terms with their environment.

Nor is it a sufficient explanation that what nature withheld with one hand it gave with the other. It certainly gave timber and many (but never enough) minerals, unlimited water power, and the most magnificent harbours; filled the sea with fish; and sent a warm current to keep the ocean gates open in winter. But even in this industrial age the population has never reached three million.

The culture of Norway, and the wisdom, have been dredged from the sea, hewn out of the forests, coaxed from the thin and hungry soil. Its civilisation is the expression of people made kindly and tolerant by generations of struggle with a pitiless environment. They had to learn wisdom or perish, and they have not perished. And now Germany is trying to fasten on them again the shackles, physical and spiritual, from which they have so painfully freed themselves.

Germany will not succeed. But we must not forget, while we fight beside the Norwegians, that we are fighting *with* rather than *for* them. Our northern campaign is being waged, not merely to drive Germans out of Norwegian fiords, but to drive gangsterism out of Norwegian civilisation.

IBSEN AND MODERN DRAMA

He Used Disinfectant — Not Perfume

PERHAPS the most outstanding contribution Norway has made to modern European culture is the work of the dramatist Henrik Ibsen. He revolutionised the western stage. He turned the theatre from a trifling after-dinner digestive agency into the most penetrating instrument of social criticism, probing with painful skill into the hypocrisies of the late nineteenth century. "Probing" is a just word to describe Ibsen's art, for he was apt to think of himself as a sort of social surgeon, and the character in his plays which he identifies with himself most nearly is that of a medical man — Doctor Stockman in "An Enemy of the People"—who is stoned (with timid little stones!) because he dares to proclaim the existence of a plague spot in the community in spite of the powerful vested interests.

HENRIK IBSEN
As drawn by
Russell Clark, from a photograph

Ibsen's Childhood

Ibsen was born at the little seaport town of Skien in the south of Norway in 1828 of a decayed patrician family. As a child he used to paint little cardboard figures in gaudy costumes and fix them in wooden stands. This visual help to his creative imagination was used throughout his life. When he was brooding over a new play—and this brooding period occupied many months before he committed anything to paper—he would have little figures on his writing table to move about as his fancy demanded.

At school his strong subjects were drawing, history and religion. At sixteen he had to earn a living and became an apothecary's assistant. The apothecary's shop was the gossiping centre of the little community of Grimstad, and the keen observation of life there provided Ibsen with a vast fund upon which to draw for his characters in later life.

On the Outside, Looking In

He gradually got into theatrical circles and wrote historical plays for the theatre at Bergen. He was fascinated by the old sagas and folk-tales which later were to be woven into the texture of "Peer Gynt."

When he was thirty-six, wounded but vigorous in spirit, he left Norway and did not return until he was old and world-famous. On his way through Germany he was enraged at the triumph of the Prussians over Denmark in the seizure of Schleswig and Holstein, and he was bitter at the failure of Norway to come to Denmark's aid. He went to Rome, and with the clearer perspective that distance affords, he set to work to chastise his countrymen, who seemed to him to have "no more relation to the past than the Greek pirates to the race that sailed to Troy and was helped by the gods." The result was the two great poetic dramas "Brand" and "Peer Gynt." These two plays together constitute probably the greatest work of dramatic literature since Goethe's "Faust." "Brand" is the Norwegian as he fancies himself or as he *should* be—a man who takes for his motto "all or nothing"—who goes *right through*. "Peer Gynt" is the Norwegian as Ibsen thought he really was—a man who goes "round about" and cannot long bear to face reality but seeks refuge in grandiose dreams. But apart from the setting and allusions these plays are universals — they are the soul history of Everyman.

Living-Happily-Ever-After

The work which was to make Ibsen a world figure was yet to come however — the great social plays, from "Pillars of Society," "The Doll's House," "Ghosts," down to "When We Dead Awaken" — plays that form a ruthless psychological analysis of social institutions and individual character.

Before Ibsen, plays were mostly sentimental trifles that showed man prettily love-making, overcoming the machinations of villainy, and living happily ever after. Ibsen starts where all *that* finishes—he asks himself—"What does this living-happily-every-after amount to?"

Storms of abuse and the most vicious invective were hurled at Ibsen throughout the world, because he dare tear away the roseate veils that hid the disease-pocked body of society. But his work conquered, and he was hailed as the great liberator of the stage and of man from the chains of pseudo-moral humbug.

He returned to his native land and died there in 1906, acclaimed by the whole world, and was buried in state by the nation.

A Master of Technique

Ibsen was a complete master of dramatic technique, and every character seems to possess an extra-personal aura which gives it universal force. His dialogue is full of rugged images as challenging as the frowning peaks that shadow the fjords. His construction is just as bold. Recall the first act of "John Gabriel Borkman." The chief character does not enter throughout the act, but we hear his steps overhead pacing backwards and forwards like the sound of a restless ghost.

Without Ibsen the modern drama would probably be a very poor thing, for his plays inspired Shaw, Galsworthy, and a host of others. Before Ibsen dramatists sprinkled perfume over human existence, before they dared present it as drama—Ibsen used disinfectant.

—J.S.