CURRENT MAGAZINES

Henrik Ibsen:—Professor J. G. Robertson, in the *Contemporary.*

Henrik Ibsen:—Dr. C. Whitaker-Wilson, in the *Fortnightly.*

An Actor on Ibsen:—Mr. Bruce Moir, in the *Nineteenth Century.*

Henrik Ibsen, *Aet.* 100:—Mr. M. S. Moses, in the *North American Review.*

The Story of Ibsen:—Mr. L. Aas in *The Bookman.*

Politics are full of walking skeletons with labels attached. Once they were men to whom politics were the conflict of human feelings, an enlargement on a great scale of those expansions of affection, of ideas and pleasures shared, of help given and received, which make the best part of human life. But someone came one day and attached a label to them; ever afterwards they were expected to illustrate what was written on the label; and if they departed from it, they were thought to be men of no principle. And so they became mere lines in some parallelogram of forces,—all principles, and no viscera.

HERBERT SIDEBOTHAM.

THE centenary of Ibsen's birth has produced its natural and valuable harvest of articles in the leading reviews. They are by no means altogether laudatory, and some are even petulant. Mixed with the general recognition that Ibsen was by far the greatest dramatist of the second half of the nineteenth century is an occasional hint that this shows how poor was that period in dramatic talent. And yet even the most hostile critic has felt bound to write about him again! Ibsen's hold has not slackened after so long a time. Nor is it difficult to see why his appeal remains so great. There are even special circumstances in our own age which should make it specially responsive to the Ibsen message, and at this centenary period it may be opportune to point them out.

* * * * *

Ibsen is commonly described as an assailant of "Convention," intolerant of the accepted social rule, an uncompromising champion of the rights of individuality. It is worth while to consider some circumstances of his youth by which his fierceness in such revolt may be explained. Radical innovators are generally irritated in the first instance by some early experience of their own, and in this respect Ibsen had the requisite spur.

To begin with, his was what Thackeray has called "the dismal precocity of poverty". Born in 1828, the same year as Tolstoy

and George Meredith, in 1836 he was witness of the sheriff's sale of his bankrupt father's effects, when only a little broken-down farm house at the Norwegian village of Skien remained as the residue of what had been a considerable estate. At eight years of age this is a tragic sort of experience for anyone, and for young Henrik Ibsen it was the beginning of a bitter antagonism to the social order. Already he had shown marked talent in the school exercises of childhood. Already he had begun to disclose an aptitude for drawing, and in a few years it was plain that he might —with any reasonable chance—become an artist. He longed for the opportunity, but he might as well have longed to be King of Norway. As soon as he was fifteen, he had to consider his education completed, and to go to work for a living. One recalls how that brilliant countryman of his in our own day—the author of *Growth of the Soil*—was driven to collecting tickets on the Chicago tram-cars! With an apron round his waist and a pestle in his hand, Henrik Ibsen for six years compounded drugs in the sleepy old Norwegian village of Grimstad, known to-day to the outer world mainly because he once worked there. In those days he used to keep a book under the counter, and read in it furtively at intervals, with a sense of stealing his employer's time. Even then he dreamed that he might yet become a writer, and his eye caught the advertisement of a literary agency which undertook to teach "style" by correspondence. Ibsen took a course of such lessons, and the instructor long years afterwards boasted how he had first taught this promising boy to write. How the literary agency was paid, we can only guess. But we do know that as the economic pressure became more intense, the pupil used to cut down expenses by dispensing with articles of underclothing!

As he crept at night to the cheerless garret where he was to steal hours for reading from his sleep as during the day he had stolen short periods from his business, he had fierce thoughts about the ways of the world. It was, of course, not the fault of the Grimstad people that Henrik Ibsen's father had failed in business, and that Henrik consequently was deprived as a boy of the chances he might otherwise have had. But the iron had entered into his soul, and he retaliated upon a society that had in truth many a vulnerable point for his satire.

It was a queer, ridiculous sort of place—the Grimstad of the middle nineteenth century, with queer affectations and ridiculous habits which the bitter young apothecary had no thought of sparing. The village numbered some five hundred inhabitants, with a sharp line of cleavage between "good" families and other families. The

older people, of rank relatively high, read the Bible and *The Lutheran Messenger*, liked to be thought more Danish than Norwegian in their ways, copied the fashions in Copenhagen, submitted unwillingly to their own country's independence which could not now be undone, and disputed over afternoon tea tables whether there had ever been any such thing as a native Norwegian literature. From a literary point of view they remind one of those in England described by Sydney Smith as "the scriptural classes". Sometimes in a little village hall, or on an improvised stage in a private house, "plays" on the most limited scale would be acted, and polite ears were much hurt if a native accent intruded on the fashionable Danish model. A younger element, stirred by the thought of "freedom" and excited by the patriotic rhapsodies of Henrik Wergeland, would celebrate the events of a generation ago with an enthusiasm which the prestige of the upper rank could not wholly suppress. Ibsen came to live in Grimstad when the bitter "Twilight Feud", in which nationalist and pro-Danish pamphleteers fought out the great question, had just begun to pass from the public mind. We know that sort of situation well,—for example, through the corresponding strife of pro-English and Gaelic Leaguers in the Dublin society of a few years ago.

In such social surroundings the young apprentice nursed his contempt for those to whom he was only a clerk in a store. Ibsen was never the most genial or the most forgiving of men, and he could not forget in later years how he had been treated at a time when treatment in a small town made a difference to him. Grimstad was ever so far from anywhere, and approachable only by sea. To what could apprenticeship there lead, beyond the prospect of becoming some day himself the owner of a Grimstad drug store? How he must at this period have talked, have reviled his lot, made cynical reflections on "unequal opportunity", we may conjecture from his language afterwards, and from some stray legends of his youth which later became current. It seems that in the neighbourhood he was thought "not a very nice young man", and was criticised for lack of that humility which was appropriate to his calling in life. As he sold his drugs, he was rude, and contradictory, and insisted on his personal opinions. Ladies trading at the store disliked the look of him, saying he was "spectral"—whatever that may have meant. Nor did he improve the position by his first literary ventures. He amused himself writing epigrams, caricatures, lampoons, in which his employer's customers figured, by no means to their delight. No doubt that apothecary often thought that a more prosaic sort of assistant might be better for the business.

It was 1848, the year of European revolutions, that roused Ibsen to a wider social outlook. Characteristically enough, he then came to Christiania with two purposes, the first to matriculate at the university, the second to find a theatrical manager who would risk the production of an historical drama he had written in spare time on the conspiracy of Catiline! Vast ambition and unhesitating self-confidence were thus throughout his early manhood ever combined with a reluctant deference to conventional necessities. *Catiline*, as we might have expected to hear, made no appeal to those who ruled the Norwegian stage. What is much more surprising is that within two years the author had so far succeeded in finding acceptance for other plays as to make up his mind for the life of a professional dramatist. Meanwhile he had to scribble for a few *kroner* from second and third rate publishers to eke out the most wretched sort of Grub Street existence.

The plays which a Christiania theatre was willing to produce were not on such themes as the Rome of Cicero. They dealt with the national spirit of Norway, for Ibsen was beginning to learn the conditions of a playwright's business. Towards Norwegian nationalism he felt thoroughly contemptuous, but he could portray the old Vikings with considerable power, and thus interpret a patriotic sentiment with which he sympathized very little. Soon he abandoned mere history. "Less about the glaciers and pine forests", he cried in 1850, "less about the dusty legends of the past, and more about what is going on in the silent hearts of your brethren". Here he was courting danger again. For he found that his brethren were often far from pleased by his analysis of their silent hearts, and their resentment soon became vocal. His work became extraordinarily unpopular. Ibsen had a gift for seeing the absurd side of Norwegian customs, etiquette, manners of social life, and he could not help risking adventurous excursions in such a field which before long made Norway too hot to hold him. The reception in Ireland of Mr. J. M. Synge's comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World*, may help one to understand what happened. So our dramatist, like Byron, shook off the dust of his country from his feet. He wandered all over Europe,—to Denmark, to Germany, to Italy. It was in the atmosphere of Rome that he conceived the project of his most elaborate drama, *Emperor and Galilean*. Surrounded by the memorials of the Eternal City, both pagan and papal, he began to brood over the vast changes which had there taken place in the spiritual experience of mankind, and was specially drawn to the days of the later fourth century, when the empire—Christianised such a short time before by Constantine

—was re-paganised by Julian the Apostate. Perhaps the play in which the inner purport of this period is set forth should be pronounced, despite its historical inaccuracies, Ibsen's most fascinating and most impressive dramatic effort.

But he moved too in the direction of what we now call "problem' plays, almost creating a new *genre* in modern dramatic art. He had in mind the whole social environment of his time, not that of his own country alone, but that of Europe in general, distraught as it then was by upheavals in government, in standards of conduct, in religion, in democratic advance. To some critics the presentation of such problems on the stage was an offence against the canons of art. Others, while agreeing that the stage is entitled to "teach", protested that what Ibsen taught was false and demoralising. Others again blessed him as the harbinger of a new dawn. Alternately reproached and glorified, he kept pouring out play after play in which the largest and deepest issues were exhibited as dilemmas in which some character has to make a fateful choice.

The plays were tremendously provocative. For example, when Mr. T. J. Grein produced *Ghosts* for the first time at the Independent Theatre in 1891, the dramatic critics of London were roused to paroxysms of execration. That storm has long since died away among the literary monitors of the stage, and has left us with little more than an object lesson upon the straining at gnats and the swallowing of camels. *Ghosts* was an unpleasant play, and the facts of life upon which it was founded are unpleasant in the last degree. One may question, perhaps, whether drama is the best instrument by which the public conscience on such matters can be awakened, and by which the wages of sin in certain of its more horrible aspects can be effectively indicated. A generation in which teachers, doctors, clergymen applaud such photo-plays as *The End of the Road* and *The Last Payment* must look upon *Ghosts* differently from the spectators of thirty years ago. And the offence, such as it was, must be called an offence against taste, not against morality. A drama on hereditary disease cannot be winsome, and Ibsen had an unfortunate liking for such pathological displays. Aesthetic preference has its right to be heard, so long as it does not affect moral censorship. The *Daily News*, the *Daily Telegraph* and the rest were, of course, perfectly sincere. But anyone who has the least acquaintance with what has since passed on the London stage, without a murmur from the journalistic oracle, must now realise what strange tricks sincerity can perpetrate upon itself.

Ibsen lived until 1906, his seventy-ninth year, and was almost reconciled to the land in which he was born, but upon which for a great part of his life he had turned his back. An imposing statue was erected to him outside the theatre of Christiania. There are odd things in the story of his private life, about which one might speak in detail. He had a mania, for example, for doing everything for himself, even to the repair of his own clothes and the sewing on of his own buttons. Madame Ibsen, fearing no doubt with good cause that the repairs would break down and the buttons would not hold, used to go into his room when he was out and "surreptitiously finish them off". More surprising still, this man of letters had a turn for business, and for looking after the royalties on his work, which made him the terror of those publishers and managers who liked to make contracts with a more dreamy and forgetful genius. The grinding poverty of his childhood—a force which leaves different kinds of mark on different kinds of people—appears to have left him somewhat unlovable in disposition. He was two years in college, for example, without ever "writing home", and one is not quite satisfied with Sir Edmund Gosse's explanation that during this time Ibsen's relatives were as poor as he was himself. Nor is it to his credit that when his father died in 1870 our dramatist had to remember that they had not exchanged words for thirty years. Humility was not his conspicuous virtue. When in 1886 a fire consumed the district of his native town in which stood the house where he was born, Ibsen's comment was that the inhabitants of Skien were quite unworthy to possess his birthplace. This seems to have been one of his rare acknowledgments of an overruling Providence. His language about his fellow-countrymen too was more candid than patriotic,—most offensive of all when he thanked them. Who can forget his *Ode for the Millenary Festival*?

> I send you thanks for gifts that help and harden,
> Thanks for each hour of purifying pain;
> Each plant that springs in my poetic garden
> Is rooted where your harshness poured its rain.

* * * * *

Why is this arrogant, querulous, and in many respects disagreeable figure worth remembering and re-analysing at this time? Did he add anything to the wealth of the world's ideas?

One aspect of Ibsen's work, emphasised probably beyond its importance by George Bernard Shaw, but unduly neglected by other critics, helps to explain why interest in him remains so intense. Shaw has singled out his warfare upon "the ideal" as the feature

most characteristic and distinctive of Ibsenism. "Life", exclaims one of the characters in *The Wild Duck*, "would be all right, if we could only be rid of those infernal fools who come to poor people's doors presenting their 'demands of the ideal' ". That was, to a great extent, the dramatist's personal view, and it has all the qualities of a Shavian paradox. One can almost hear the author of *Man and Superman* groaning—like Oscar Wilde when he came across a new epigram—"I wish I had said that". And perhaps the famous retort to Wilde is in place here too: "Never mind; you will". For in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* the same paradox is worked for all it is worth, and possibly for a good deal more. Some scoffer has suggested that the book should have been called *The Quintessence of Shaw*.

But the paradox it contains is full of important truth. In such plays as *Pillars of Society, Rosmersholm, An Enemy of the People, Brand, The Doll's House,* Ibsen depicted the folly of supposing that some stock maxim, or rule, or formula can with fitness be followed literally as a guide to conduct. The cast-iron "ideal", used as a sort of moral ready-reckoner, in disregard of modifying circumstances, was to him as great evidence of superstition as the world had ever seen in the crude idolatries of the past. It was the constant burden of his plays that no mechanical "principle" is available, no "rule" to dispense one from using one's head and forecasting consequences in a moral choice. This is what makes his dramas so admirable an introduction to moral philosophy. They shock the complaisant composure of those who have never realised that there is such a thing as honest perplexity of conscience. Let such persons tackle the task of showing just where Rosmer was to blame, or Nora Helmer, or Brand, and how the "general principle" can be so stated as to avoid such difficulties of application in future. Ibsen is in truth *facile princeps* in this field of the problem play—as yet unequalled by anyone in the multitude of his imitators.

Ethical dilemmas of the sort in which he deals are indeed an ancient field of dramatic art, and the special perplexities he has presented are often not the most poignant. About most of them the reader may feel able to suggest at once where the fault lay, and what decision should have been taken. But the reader's confidence is frequently due to the fact that he takes up the situation at a stage far earlier than that at which the difficulty arose, and delivers judgement with all the ease of one who is wise after the event. He indicates, in short, not what should be done with the dilemma when it has appeared, but how it might have been stopped from appearing at all. Moreover, the value of Ibsen's work lies es-

pecially in his exhibition of such puzzles as come within the sphere of ordinary life. He shows how we have not to seek them out in those weird combinations of circumstance which so many imaginative writers have racked their brains to devise, and in the unravelling of which—as of a Chinese puzzle—ingenuity is taxed, while there is no sense either of personal distress or of personal alarm. The quandary of Oedipus or Antigone is hopeless enough, and may well have thrilled the ancient Greek audience. But it does not come home, like the Ibsen quandary, to the modern reader as of a kind in which he himself or his neighbours might quite well be involved. Herein Ibsen is perhaps the real founder of the "problem play" of our time. Yet, *mutatis mutandis*, those perplexities of Greek tragedy do reproduce themselves in our own average experience, and he has just translated them into modern speech. The tyranny of the abstract "ideal" is, as he argues, at the root of many an ethical confusion of to-day, just as some superstitious fancy about deities or Fate used to throw Greek thought into chaos. It may perhaps serve to show why his plays have still so enthralling an interest if one considers how just this Ibsenite line of reflection is suited to urgent difficulties of the present. Here indeed is one of the few writers of half a century back whose suggestions—so far from becoming antiquated—have won a new impressiveness from the experience which followed.

Think, for instance, of those "formulae" by which we try to solve the problem of employer and workman. The formulae have indeed somewhat changed of late, but we still hunt for solution in just what Ibsen ridiculed as the cast-iron rule. Nor has anyone shown better how this quest must be vain. There was a time when the rule was simplicity itself and accepted with a simplicity that was pathetic. Those who complicated a Labour question by introducing *moral* considerations were treated as intruders. They were told that the whole thing was purely a matter of business, and that the single maxim to be applied was that of "Free Contract". Nassau Senior, in his resistance to the Factory Acts, declared that State interference would sound the death-knell of England's commercial prosperity. Lord Melbourne defined the whole purpose of government as that of keeping the peace and enforcing contracts. A memorable Whig speech by Macaulay in the House of Commons urged a grant in aid of education, on the ground that herein is an instrument for keeping order, and that to provide more teachers will be both cheaper and more effective than to erect more police-barracks. The appeal was always and everywhere to *Laissez Faire*, to "Supply and Demand," or to some other rigid "formula".

That time is past. Disavowing the mid-Victorians, we now universally recognise industrial and social issues as also moral issues. But what is not yet recognised in any adequate way is that the moral principles which have successfully challenged the original economic principles may be no less fatuously abstract, no less sterile than the rules they have superseded. On one side we hear about "the right of property", on another side about "the right of liberty", on yet another about "the right of life". It surely needs no argument to show that from not one of these taken alone, like a geometrical concept, can we deduce conclusions that will prescribe just what should be done in a particular case. For here lies no province for abstract deduction. We have to enquire with a new thoroughness just what results might be expected from this industrial regulation and from that, how each will affect the values we desire most to preserve, and where on the whole the balance of social advantage will fall. First we need to be clear about the values themselves, and we cannot be content to state these just as they were stated by the classical moralists of centuries ago. The world has moved.

Again, we agree—I suppose—that the man who becomes a millionaire by "cornering" some essential commodity, and thus compelling his neighbours either to buy at his price or to starve, is a social enemy. We likewise recognise the great social advantage which belongs to the principle of leaving an open field to ability, enterprise, commercial foresight. The experiment with Communism in Russia is at least as deterrent as that with Rings and Bosses in the United States. But can anyone put his finger on the point at which legitimate reward of superior business acumen may be said to end and extortion may be said to begin? Is there such a thing as a *reasonable* profit? Do we recognise any meaning in the old prohibition of "usury", without falling into Ruskinian fanaticism against fair interest? A war profiteer, luxuriating in all he could extract from his country's desperate necessities, can boast that what he is using is his own, and that only a Bolshevist would dispute his right to do with it as he will. Herein he is having recourse to what Ibsen called a *formula*, and the formula-ridden amongst us—that is, the vast majority of the "respectable"—have no reply to him. We may protest, indeed, that he must first tell us what is one's own, and our protest will be right in spirit, though expressed with fatal inaccuracy. There is no question that the war profiteer's wealth is legally his own, and to ask whether all legal property is under moral sanctions will carry the devotees of formulae into a puzzle that will terrify them. For it suggests just a concrete

investigation of the consequences that flow from admitting private property in this or in that.

Another formula current in our time is the alleged "right to work". Are the unemployed entitled to demand employment from the State? If we say that there is no such thing as a right to work, it seems to follow that for that appallingly large number of persons who can work, who are willing to work, and who cannot obtain work, there does not exist even a right to live. Will the moral consciousness bear us out in this? If not, then how shall we answer the question "What is a living wage"? Does it mean simply a wage that is enough to provide the labourer with bodily shelter and sustenance, or ought it to include in some degree the means of mental culture and enjoyment for himself and his family? Ought it to be sufficient to enable him to marry at an early age? Or should the indigent worker be compulsorily celibate? On the one hand the prevention of early marriage is fraught with obvious moral risks; on the other hand, it is widely felt that to burden the public with the necessity of supporting not only the worker himself, but as many children as he may choose to bring into the world, would create in time an intolerable situation. Very much the same arguments and counter-arguments may be urged in respect to the proposal, so popular among Socialists, for the State feeding of school children.

Here then, in circumstances with which we are all too familiar, is an example of what Ibsen would have called the desolating effect of a hard and fast "ideal". The abstract phrase or slogan makes our intellectual confusion worse confounded. Nor have the professional moralists done much to relieve this state of mind. When the employer says the workman is a highway robber, and the workman replies that the employer is a disguised thief, these experts refuse to arbitrate. They take refuge in the reiteration of "ideals" that are an idle mockery of those who must decide whether workman or employer shall go to gaol.

* * * * *

It is because he thus anticipated so much of what was afterwards to develop into urgency that we who have seen the development are now thrilled by Ibsen's plays. The vivacity of dialogue in them is indeed wonderful—though not more wonderful than in his contemporary Björnson, who is far less read. His skill, learned by long practice in actual stage management, served him in making perfect adjustment of his dramas to the needs of the theatre. But it

is for its enduring appeal to thought, rather than for any aptitude of either style or setting, that Ibsen's work lives.

One remembers with regret that of the four men best qualified to write on his significance in the history of drama, three have lately died within a few months of one another—Georg Brandes, William Archer, and Sir Edmund Gosse. Of these, Brandes did most for Ibsen's fame on the continent of Europe, while Archer and Gosse introduced him to the English-speaking countries. He needed such sponsors, for with his anti-Norwegian resentment he combined a strange aversion to the literature and ways of foreign countries, and thus bade fair to be isolated indeed. Ibsen was in an extraordinary degree mentally self-made. He read few books—probably most constantly, strange to relate, the Bible. He was a very incompetent linguist, speaking and writing German poorly, while he actually gave up all reading of either French or English. Of music he knew only by hearsay, for he had no musical ear whatever. Where else shall we find such success of native genius, with none of the usual aids?

Should George Bernard Shaw be added to the list of highly-qualified Ibsenites, making the fourth of his sponsors? In truth not a few have been first introduced to the great Norwegian through Shaw's famous brochure. Doubt has been cast on the value of the introduction, by cynics who say that here as elsewhere "G. B. S." has introduced us to no one in the world but himself! A Xenophon, one remembers, will often speak more truly than a Plato about the philosopher they both knew. And in like manner a Gosse presents Ibsen more truly than he is presented by a Shaw.

Yet there is plainly a side or aspect of this remarkable dramatist which only his fellow-dramatist has had insight to discover and power to expound.

You cannot, says Shaw, put the quintessence of Ibsenism into a formula, for the quintessence of Ibenism is that there is no formula. There is no ideal which should be followed "in utter and uncompromising fidelity", for all rules are fallible, requiring corrections, admitting exceptional cases, disastrous if one uses them blindly. The question about any purpose is not whether it is good, but how much of it is good, and with what other ingredients it must be tempered if it is not to work on the whole for evil. More "discerning" use of the principle will be of no avail,—still less any more precise defining of it. How grotesquely untrue, for example, to say that the faults of democracy are to be cured by *more* democracy, or that the breakdown in pursuit of liberty is to be helped by a more cautious interpretation of the word! Not by drawing up more

exact and exhaustive dictionaries can we escape from this trouble. The fault is not with looseness of ideas or of words; it lies in the baffling complexity of *things*.

Is there a truth better worth emphasising just now, or one which is better served by those resources of dramatic illustration that are far more effective than a philosophic text book? Obviously the time of the Great War was a time when "ideals" and "formulae", in the Ibsen sense of these words, were manufactured on an enormous scale. The years since its close have been marked by the unlearning of these. Think of "democracy" for instance, of which Dean Inge used to say that he was stopped from characterising it as he would like to do because one must not mock one's fellow-creatures at their devotions, and of which he can now say that as an idol "after a century of fatuous adulation" it now stands very insecurely on its pedestal.

According to the late Woodrow Wilson, it was to make the world safe for democracy that the Great War was fought. We have indeed from time to time a certain doubt suggested, like the misgiving of a prophet lately gone who was not quite sure that even faith in "government by discussion" will remain undisturbed, who thought that an Ice Age might await the mind of man as Ice Ages have repeatedly descended upon the human dwelling-place, and who declared that for himself—lifelong democrat as he had been—he was not sufficiently enamoured of his own opinions to desire to propagate them. One thinker after another has thus to make the discovery that the purpose of the universe is not definable in "a formula which undergraduates can easily remember". Ibsen would have said "Amen". Nor can that purpose be compressed into a newspaper headline, so that letters of the requisite size will find room in the column of a popular daily. It is when we think of such prevision, and of the power with which he set all this wisdom forth to a long unheeding age, that we feel today the spell of Ibsen.

H. L. S.