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HENRIK IBSEN

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THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH
PILLARS OF SOCIETY

WITH INTRODUCTIONS BY
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THE LEAGUE OF YOUTH.

INTRODUCTION.

AFTER the momentous four years of his first visit to Italy, to which we owe *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen left Rome in May 1868, visited Florence, and then spent the summer at Berchtesgaden in Southern Bavaria. There he was busy "mentally wrestling" with the new play which was to take shape as *De Unges Forbund* (*The League of Youth*); but he did not begin to put it on paper until, after a short stay at Munich, he settled down in Dresden, in the early autumn. Thence, he wrote to his publisher, Hegel, on October 31: "My new work is making rapid progress. . . . The whole outline is finished and written down. The first act is completed, the second will be in the course of a week, and by the end of the year I hope to have the play ready. It will be in prose, and in every way adapted for the stage. The title is *The League of Youth*; or, *The Almighty & Co.*, a comedy, in five acts." At Hegel's suggestion he omitted the second title, "though," he wrote, "it could have given offence to no one *who had read the play.*"

Apparently the polishing of the dialogue took

longer than Ibsen anticipated. It was his first play in modern prose, and the medium did not come easy to him. Six or seven years earlier, he wrote the opening scenes of *Love's Comedy* in prose, but was dissatisfied with the effect, and recast the dialogue in rhymed verse. Having now outgrown his youthful romanticism, and laid down, in *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, the fundamental positions of his criticism of life, he felt that to carry that criticism into detail he must come to close quarters with reality ; and to that end he required a suppler instrument than verse. He must cultivate, as he afterwards * put it, "the very much more difficult art of writing the genuine, plain language spoken in real life." Probably the mastery of this new art cost him more effort than he anticipated, for, instead of having the play finished by the end of 1868, he did not despatch the manuscript to Copenhagen until March 1869. It was published on September 30 of that year.

While the comedy was still in process of conception, Ibsen had written to his publisher: "This new, *peaceable* work is giving me great pleasure." It thus appears that he considered it less polemical in its character than the poems which had immediately preceded it. If his intentions were pacific, they were entirely frustrated. The play was regarded as a violent and wanton attack on the Norwegian Liberal party, while Stensgård was taken for a personal lampoon on Björnson. Its first performance at the Christiania Theatre (October 18, 1869) passed quietly enough ; but at the second and third performances an organised opposition took the field, and disturbances amounting almost to a riot occurred.

* Letter to Lucie Wolf, May 1883. *Correspondence*, Letter 171.

Public feeling soon calmed down, and the play (the first prose comedy of any importance in Norwegian literature) became one of the most popular pieces in the repertory of the theatre. But it led to an estrangement from Björnson and the Liberal party, which was not healed for many a day—not, indeed, until *Ghosts* had shown the Norwegian public the folly of attempting to make party capital out of the works of a poet who stood far above party.

The estrangement from Björnson had begun some time before the play appeared. A certain misunderstanding had followed the appearance of *Peer Gynt*,* and had been deepened by political differences. Björnson had become an ardent National Liberal, with leanings towards Republicanism; Ibsen was not at all a Republican (he deeply offended Björnson by accepting orders and decorations), and his political sympathies, while not of a partisan nature, were mainly "Scandinavian"—that is to say, directed towards a closer union of the three Scandinavian kingdoms. Distance, and the evil offices of gossiping friends, played their part in begetting dissension. Ibsen's last friendly letter to Björnson (of these years) was written in the last days of 1867; in the first days of 1869, while he was actually busied with *The League of Youth*, we find him declining to contribute to a Danish magazine for the reason (among others) that Björnson was to be one of its joint editors.

The news of the stormy reception of his comedy reached Ibsen in Egypt, where, as the guest of the Khedive, he was attending the opening of the Suez Canal. He has recorded the incident in a poem, *At Port Said*. On his return to Dresden he wrote to

* See *Correspondence*, Letters 44 and 45.

Hegel (December 14, 1869): "The reception of *The League of Youth* pleases me very much; for the disapprobation I was prepared, and it would have been a disappointment to me if there had been none. But what I was not prepared for was that Björnson should feel himself attacked by the play, as rumour says he does. Is this really the case? He must surely see that it is not himself I have had in mind, but his pernicious and 'lie-steeped' clique who have served me as models. However, I will write to him to-day or to-morrow, and I hope that the affair, in spite of all differences, will end in a reconciliation." The intended letter does not appear to have been written; nor would it, probably, have produced the desired effect, for Björnson's resentment was very deep. He had already (in November) written a poem to Johan Sverdrup, the leader of the Liberal party, in which he deplored the fact that "the sacred grove of poetry no longer afforded sanctuary against assassination," or as the Norwegian word vigorously expresses it, "sneak-murder." Long afterwards, in 1881, he explained what he meant by this term: "It was not the portrayal of contemporary life and known personages that I called assassination. It was the fact that *The League of Youth* sought to represent our young Liberal party as a gang of ambitious speculators, whose patriotism was as empty as their phraseology; and particularly that prominent men were first made clearly recognisable, and then had false hearts and shady characters foisted upon them." It is difficult to see, indeed, how Ibsen can have expected Björnson to distinguish very clearly between an attack on his "lie-steeped clique" and a lampoon on himself. Even Stensgård's religious phraseology, the confidence

with which he claims God as a member of his party, was at that time characteristic of Björnson. The case, in fact, seems to have been very like that of the portraiture of Leigh Hunt in Harold Skimpole. Both Dickens and Ibsen had unconsciously taken more from their respective models than they intended. They imagined, perhaps, that the features which did not belong to the original would conceal the likeness ; whereas their actual effect was only to render the portraits libellous.

Eleven years passed before Björnson and Ibsen were reconciled. In 1880 (after the appearance of *A Doll's House* and before that of *Ghosts*), Björnson wrote in an American magazine : "I think I have a pretty thorough acquaintance with the dramatic literature of the world, and I have not the slightest hesitation in saying that Henrik Ibsen possesses more dramatic power than any other playwright of our day. The fact that I am not always partial to the style of his work makes me all the more certain that I am right in my judgment of him."

The League of Youth soon became very popular in Norway, and it had considerable success in Sweden and Denmark. It was acted with notable excellence at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen. Outside of Scandinavia it has never taken any hold of the stage. At the date of its appearance, Ibsen was still quite unknown, even in Germany ; and when he became known, its technique was already antiquated. It has been acted once or twice both in Germany and England, and has proved very amusing on the stage ; but it is essentially an experimental, transitional work. The poet is trying his tools.

The technical influence of Scribe and his school is

apparent in every scene. Ibsen's determination not to rest content with the conventions of that school may already be discerned, indeed, in his disuse of the soliloquy and the aside ; but, apart from these flagrant absurdities, he permits himself to employ almost all the devices of the Scribe method. Note, for example, how much of the action arises from sheer misunderstanding. The whole second act turns upon the Chamberlain's misunderstanding of the bent of Stensgård's diatribe in the first act. As the Chamberlain is deliberately misled by his daughter and Fieldbo, the misunderstanding is not, perhaps, technically inadmissible. Yet it has to be maintained by very artificial means. Why, one may ask, does not Fieldbo, in his long conversation with Stensgård, in the second act, warn him of the thin ice on which he is skating ? There is no sufficient reason, except that the great situation at the end of the act would thus be rendered impossible. It is in the fourth act, however, that the methods of the vaudevillist are most apparent. It is one string of blunders of the particular type which the French significantly call "quiproquos." Some arise through the quite diabolical genius for malicious wire-pulling developed by old Lundestad ; but most of them are based upon that deliberate and elaborate vagueness of expression on the part of the characters which is the favourite artifice of the professor of theatrical sleight-of-hand. We are not even spared the classic quiproquo of the proposal by proxy mistaken for a proposal direct—Stensgård's overtures to Madam Rundholmen on behalf of Bastian being accepted by her as an offer on his own behalf. We are irresistibly reminded of Mrs. Bardell's fatal misunderstanding of Mr. Pickwick's intentions. All

this, to be sure, is excellent farce, but there is no originality in the expedients by which it is carried on. Equally conventional, and equally redolent of Scribe, is the conduct of the fifth act. The last drop of effect is wrung out of the quiproquos with an almost mathematical accuracy. We are reminded of a game at puss-in-the-four-corners, in which Stensgård tries every corner in turn, only to find himself at last left out in the cold. Then, as the time approaches to ring down the curtain, every one is seized with a fever of amiability, the Chamberlain abandons all his principles and prejudices, even to the point of subscribing for twenty copies of Aslaksen's newspaper, and the whole thing becomes scarcely less unreal than one of the old-comedy endings, in which the characters stand in a semicircle while each delivers a couplet of the epilogue. It is difficult to believe that the facile optimism of this conclusion could at any time have satisfied the mind which, only twelve years later, conceived the picture of Oswald Alving shrinking together in his chair and babbling, "Mother—give me the sun."

But, while we realise with what extraordinary rapidity and completeness Ibsen outgrew this phase of his art, we must not overlook the genuine merits of this brilliant comedy. With all its faults, it was an advance on the technique of its day, and was hailed as such by a critic so penetrating as George Brandes. Placing ourselves at the point of view of the time, we may perhaps say that its chief defect is its marked inequality of style. The first act is purely preparatory; the fifth act, as we have noted, is a rather perfunctory winding-up. The real play lies in the intervening acts; and each of these belongs to a different order of art. The second act is a piece of

high comedy, quite admirable in its kind ; the third act, both in tone and substance, verges upon melodrama ; while the fourth act is nothing but rattling farce. Even from the Scribe point of view, this jumping from key to key is a fault. Another objection which Scribe would probably have urged is that several of Fieldbo's speeches, and the attitude of the Chamberlain towards him, are, on the face of them, incomprehensible, and are only retrospectively explained. The poetics of that school forbid all reliance on retrospect ; perhaps because they do not contemplate the production of any play about which any human being would care to think twice.

The third act, though superficially a rather tame interlude between the vigorous second act and the bustling fourth, is in reality the most characteristic of the five. The second act might be signed Augier, and the fourth Labiche ; but in the third the coming Ibsen is manifest. The scene between the Chamberlain and Monsen is, in its disentangling of the past, a preliminary study for much of his later work—a premonition, in fact, of his characteristic method. Here, too, in the character of Selma and her outburst of revolt, we have by far the most original feature of the play. In Selma there is no trace of French influence, spiritual or technical. With admirable perspicacity, Dr. Brandes realised from the outset the significance of this figure. "Selma," he wrote, "is a new creation, and her relation to the family might form the subject of a whole drama. But in the play as it stands she has scarcely room to move." The drama which Brandes here foresaw, Ibsen wrote ten years later in *A Doll's House*.

With reference to the phrase "De lokale forhold," here lamely represented by "the local situation," Ibsen has a curious remark in a letter to Markus Grønvold, dated Stockholm, September 3, 1877. His German translator, he says, has rendered the phrase literally "lokale Verhältnisse"—"which is wrong, because no suggestion of comicality or narrow-mindedness is conveyed by this German expression. The rendering ought to be 'unsere berechtigten Eigenthümlichkeiten,' an expression which conveys the same meaning to Germans as the Norwegian one does to us Scandinavians." This suggestion is, unfortunately, of no help to the English translator, especially when it is remembered in what context Aslaksen uses the phrase "de lokale forhold" in the fifth act of *An Enemy of the People*.

PILLARS OF SOCIETY.

INTRODUCTION.

IN the eight years that intervened between *The League of Youth* and *Pillars of Society*—his second prose play of modern life—Ibsen published a small collection of his poems (1871), and his "World-Historic Drama," *Emperor and Galilean* (1873). After he had thus dismissed from his mind the figure of Julian the Apostate, which had haunted it ever since his earliest days in Rome, he deliberately abandoned, once for all, what may be called masquerade romanticism—that external stimulus to the imagination which lies in remoteness of time and unfamiliarity of scene and costume. It may be that, for the moment, he also intended to abandon, not merely romanticism, but romance—to deal solely with the literal and commonplace facts of life, studied in the dry light of everyday experience. If that was his purpose, it was very soon to break down; but in *Pillars of Society* he more nearly achieved it than in any other work.

Many causes contributed to the usually long pause between *Emperor and Galilean* and *Pillars of Society*. The summer of 1874 was occupied with a visit to

Norway—the first he had paid since the Hegira of ten years earlier. A good deal of time was devoted to the revision of some of his earlier works, which were republished in Copenhagen ; while the increasing vogue of his plays on the stage involved a considerable amount of business correspondence. *The Vikings* and *The Pretenders* were acted in these years, not only throughout Scandinavia, but at many of the leading theatres of Germany ; and in 1876, after much discussion and negotiation, *Peer Gynt* was for the first time placed on the stage, in Christiania.

The first mention of *Pillars of Society* occurs in a letter from Ibsen to his publisher, Hegel, of October 23, 1875, in which he mentions that the first act, “always to me the most difficult part of a play,” is ready, and states that it will be “a drama in five acts.” Unless this be a mere slip of the pen, it is curious as showing that, even when the first act was finished, Ibsen did not foresee in detail the remainder of the action. In the course of further development an act dropped out of his scheme. On November 25, 1875, he reports to Hegel : “The first act of my new drama is ready—the fair copy written ; I am now working at Act Second” ; but it was not until the summer of 1877 that the completed manuscript was sent to Copenhagen. The book was published in the early autumn.

The theatrical success of *Pillars of Society* was immediate and striking. First performed in Copenhagen, November 18, 1877, it soon found its way to all the leading stages of Scandinavia. In Berlin, in the early spring of 1878, it was produced at five different theatres within a single fortnight ; and it has ever since maintained its hold on the German

stage. Before the end of the century, it had been acted more than 1200 times in Germany and Austria. An adaptation of the play, by the present writer, was produced at the old Gaiety Theatre, London, for a single performance, on the afternoon of December 15, 1880—this being the first time that Ibsen's name had appeared on an English playbill. Again, in 1889, a single performance of it was given at the Opera Comique Theatre; and yet again in May 1901 the Stage Society gave two performances of it at the Strand Theatre. In the United States it has been acted frequently in German, but very rarely in English. The first performance took place in New York in 1891. The play did not reach the French stage until 1896, when it was performed by M. Lugné-Poë's organisation, L'Œuvre. In other countries one hears of a single performance of it, here and there; but, except in Scandinavia and Germany, it has nowhere taken a permanent hold upon the theatre.

Nor is the reason far to seek. By the time the English, American, and French public had fully awakened to the existence of Ibsen, he himself had so far outgrown the phase of his development marked by *Pillars of Society*, that the play already seemed commonplace and old-fashioned. It exactly suited the German public of the 'eighties; it was exactly on a level with their theatrical intelligence. But it was above the theatrical intelligence of the Anglo-American public, and—I had almost said—below that of the French public. This is, of course, an exaggeration. What I mean is that there was no possible reason why the countrymen of Augier and Dumas should take any special interest in *Pillars of Society*. It was not obviously in advance of these masters in

technical skill, and the vein of Teutonic sentiment running through it could not greatly appeal to the Parisian public of that period. Thus it is not in the least surprising that, outside of Germany and Scandinavia, *Pillars of Society* had everywhere to follow in the wake of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, and was everywhere found something of an anti-climax. Possibly its time may be yet to come in England and America. A thoroughly well-mounted and well-acted revival might now appeal to that large class of playgoers which stands on very much the same intellectual level on which the German public stood in the eighteen-eighties.

But it is of all Ibsen's works the least characteristic, because, acting on a transitory phase of theory, he has been almost successful in divesting it of poetic charm. There is not even a Selma in it. Of his later plays, only *An Enemy of the People* is equally prosaic in substance; and it is raised far above the level of the commonplace by the genial humour, the magnificent creative energy, displayed in the character of Stockmann. In *Pillars of Society* there is nothing that rises above the commonplace. Compared with Stockmann, Bernick seems almost a lay-figure, and even Lona Hessel is an intellectual construction—formed of a blend of new theory with old sentiment—rather than an absolute creation, a living and breathing woman, like Nora, or Mrs. Alving, or Rebecca, or Hedda. This is, in brief, the only play of Ibsen's in which plot can be said to preponderate over character. The plot is extraordinarily ingenious and deftly pieced together. Several of the scenes are extremely effective from the theatrical point of view, and in a good many individual touches we may recognise the

incomparable master-hand. One of these touches is the scene between Bernick and Rörlund in the third act, in which Bernick's craving for casuistical consolation meets with so painful a rebuff. Only a great dramatist could have devised this scene; but to compare it with a somewhat similar passage in *The Pretenders*—the scene in the fourth act between King Skule and Jatgeir Skald—is to realise what is meant by the difference between dramatic poetry and dramatic prose.

I have called Lona Hessel a composite character, because she embodies in a concentrated form the two different strains of feeling that run through the whole play. Beyond the general attack on social pharisaism announced in the very title, we have a clear assertion of the claim of women to moral and economical individuality and independence. Dina, with her insistence on "becoming something for herself" before she will marry Johan, unmistakably foreshadows Nora and Petra. But at the same time the poet is far from having cleared his mind of the old ideal of the infinitely self-sacrificing, dumbly devoted woman, whose life has no meaning save in relation to some more or less unworthy male—the Ingeborg-Agnes-Solveig ideal we may call it. In the original edition of *The Pretenders*, Ingeborg said to Skule: "To love, to sacrifice all, and be forgotten, that is woman's saga;" and out of that conception arose the very tenderly touched figure of Martha in this play. If Martha, then, stands for the old ideal—the ideal of the older generation—and Dina for the ideal of the younger generation, Lona Hessel hovers between the two. At first sight she seems like an embodiment of the "strong-minded female," the champion of

Woman's Rights, and despiser of all feminine graces and foibles. But in the end it appears that her devotion to Bernick has been no less deep and enduring than Martha's devotion to Johan. Her "old friendship does not rust" is a delightful speech; but it points back to the Ibsen of the past, not forward to the Ibsen of the future. Yet this is not wholly true: for the strain of sentiment which inspired it never became extinct in the poet. He believed to the end in the possibility and the beauty of great self-forgetful human emotions; and there his philosophy went very much deeper than that of some of his disciples.

In consistency of style, and in architectural symmetry of construction, the play marks a great advance upon *The League of Youth*. From the end of the first act to the middle of the last, it is a model of skilful plot-development. The exposition, which occupies so much of the first act, is carried out by means of a somewhat cumbrous mechanism. No doubt the "Kaffee-Klatsch" is in great measure justified as a picture of the tattling society of the little town. It does not altogether ignore the principle of economy. But it is curious to note the rapid shrinkage in the poet's expositions. Here we have the necessary information conveyed by a whole party of subsidiary characters. In the next play, *A Doll's House*, we have still a set exposition, but two characters suffice for it, and one the heroine. In the next play again—that is to say, in *Ghosts*—the poet has arrived at his own peculiar formula, and the exposition is indistinguishably merged in the action. Still greater is the contrast between the conclusion of *Pillars of Society* and that of *A Doll's House*. It would be too much to call