

A Masterpiece

John Gabriel Borkman, a drama in four acts, by Henrik Ibsen. Presented by Emanuel Reicher at the Forty-eighth Street Theatre, New York, April 13, 1915.

WHAT has a genius to say about human character as he nears the end of his road? What has he to reveal that is hidden to young life in the thick of momentous decision? What has he to say of ambition and of sacrifice, of success and of failure? What has he to declare of the faiths that conflict in us and the destiny that shapes our ends?

Ibsen was nearly seventy when he gathered himself to write the tragedy of "John Gabriel Borkman." Unlike so many other great poets and seers, he had come to old age in full power, and in this tragedy he had found a theme peculiarly suited to his unflinching inspection. Less salient, if you will, than the best dramas of his earlier years, it gave Ibsen men and women in their basic relations. It gave him internecine domesticity. It gave him civil war between the sexes, and it gave him civil war in the soul. On these deep-set conflicts, played out to their bitter natural end, his utterance was never more measured or more inclusively sympathetic.

From the start of "John Gabriel Borkman" we are steeped in quiet tragedy. From the first echo of those lonely footfalls overhead, we feel the reverberation in every soul of the disgrace that has visited the household. That the Administrator should have withdrawn from his wife during the eight years since he was released from prison is not, you feel, the invention of drama. It is a telling evidence of the characters with whom we are dealing. For Mrs. Borkman, her husband has been guilty of the unpardonable sin. In wrecking his bank he has not merely dragged down a number of innocent people into ruin. That does not overwhelm Mrs. Borkman. Nor is it her occupation with the stigma of his imprisonment. What she cannot forgive is the price she herself has had to pay in independence. Her own fortune swept away, she had lost her power to make for her son the place she desired. A proud, austere, unyielding woman, she found herself at the mercy of her sister—the woman who also loves Borkman and Borkman's son.

And as the play opens we find this unmarried sister, twin in age and in aspiration, coming with the terrible advantage of owning Mrs. Borkman's home to assert her will as to Mrs. Borkman's son. She is aware, Ella Rentheim, that she has not long to live. Having reared Borkman's boy during the years of adversity, she craves fiercely at the end to have his sole devotion, and she is prepared to fight with the mother for him with all the cruel power of her superior imagination and charm. The hard inexpressive woman and the hard expressive woman speak out their conflict at last, while overhead can be heard the endless pacing of the self-imprisoned one.

When one considers how the imagination has been aroused by the dual references to Borkman in the first act, the demands on the actor who must represent this wolf in solitude are certainly not light. But if it was with trepidation that one waited for the second act to reveal Emanuel Reicher, that trepidation soon gave place to profound sympathy. It is true that there was something a little fusty about this Borkman, something of shallow vanity as well as wounded pride, and one was surprised to find him antique and almost patriarchal as a piece of human furniture. But

wall mocking fine gestures, and to the figure in front of these Mr. Reicher gave gravity and dignity and depth. It was the kind of performance that made one see character in the round. It had touches of genius.

When poor Wilhelm Fodal (acted with such understanding by Roland Young) joined John Gabriel in the gallery, the shadow of mimic greatness minced in rhythm with the shadow of real greatness, and irony had its danse macabre. But in the succeeding reunion between John Gabriel and Ella Rentheim there was something more than bitter penetration. In his sense of Ella's love for John Gabriel, Ibsen conveyed a great deal in miraculously few words, and yet enough to prepare us for the staggering blow to Ella's "love-life" that came in one simple admission. This was not, to my mind, a dislocation of realities for the sake of wringing our heart. It was, really, a last needed touch to the essential cruelty of the ambition which, whether he had realized his vast dreams or not, made of John Gabriel a failure.

In the third act, the battle over Mrs. Borkman's son is fought out between the three elders, and here it seems to me that Ibsen is so extraordinarily perceptive for the generation of old. Here was no senile talk about duty and depravity and the rest, no prattle about sacrifice. Although an old man, Ibsen had retained his comprehension of youth, and he had not begun to glorify possessiveness, or even to sympathize with it. If Erhart Borkman went out from all three who gave love in exchange for liberty, it was not simply because he was enamored and weak. It was the answer of a fourth egoism to these three egoisms. And here again Ella Rentheim is the expressive soul, and Mrs. Borkman the torn inexpressive.

Having given an answer to their parental imperialisms, Ibsen then added his characteristic symbolic word. In this word he permitted Borkman at the end of all to deliver judgment on his own dreams of greatness, and the last scene is one in which the two passionate women, standing over his body, join hands. It is regrettable that, in the present performance, this scene should seem unreal. With the intention of giving the highest effect to Ibsen's utterances, but with the sad result of making them sound like rhetoric, Mr. Reicher selected to deliver his last speeches from a high seat right under a spotlight, and then to collapse on the steps leading up to the seat, and lie in this exceedingly uncomfortable position in the rigor of death. Up to this point, Mr. Reicher's slow delivery had not mattered and the foreignness of his accent was of no account, but when it came to his end, the strangeness of Reicher's posture and delivery combined unfortunately with Borkman's words. To keep these last phases of Borkman's life in the realistic picture would tax any actor. It is a pity that Mr. Reicher risked so much for the sake of egregious impressiveness. But after a performance so full of feeling and understanding all through, on the part of Miss Alice Harrington as Mrs. Borkman, Mr. Paul Gordon as Erhart, and the more limited Miss Alma Kruger as Ella Rentheim, it is impossible to end on this criticism. Mr. Reicher has performed a service, as well as a part. He has given New York one of its exceedingly rare opportunities to see a great play.

It is typical of New York, however, that in the *Sun*, for example, Ibsen should once more be called "dull," "gloomy," "narrow," "suffocatingly provincial," "suburban," "morbid," "obvious," "sick man," "god of ennui." Compared to these baffling expressions of discontent, the peculiar whine of pain that a dog makes when it listens to music is intelligibly human. But Ibsen was not intended

Books and Things

A FEW days ago I picked up a recent number of my favorite magazine, the *National Geographic*, opened on a picture and read the legend underneath: "The giant testing machine which can register with equal accuracy the power necessary to crush an egg-shell or to tear apart the strongest steel girder." These words, which I was able to read without violent emotion, resembled rather nearly some others heard years before, when the first Corliss engine and I were young. In those older words there was the same inclusion and contrast of power and delicacy, the same egg-shell refrain. Yes, the old ones must have differed from the new only in this, that they understood the secret of provoking wonder. Day after day I lived on the thought of that early Corliss miracle. Visions gathered and took independent shape. I saw a boy who grew in stature and strength, and whose friends hesitated which to envy more, the monstrous force or the exceeding nicety with which he played games.

Was it earlier or later that natural magic was revealed as quite equal to supernatural? I was standing in our garden, by the cellar door, looking at the honeysuckle, when there came a sudden creation of a many-colored thing, fixed in the air for an instant by wings invisibly rapid, motionless as light. Although I guessed the vanished wonder had been a humming-bird, none the less violently did the word magic, magic, magic keep throbbing in my brain. Last winter, on a tropical island famous for rainfall and antlered gorges, I deplored my inability to be thrilled by magical nature. Nothing but an intelligently interested eye did I have to turn upon the humming-birds, though they patiently called my attention to the identity of their behavior with that of the New Englander I was always holding up to them. As for the island rainbows, they were so numerous that it never seemed worth while to get up and find any particular rainbow's end. There was plenty of time for that.

Power to wonder, to keep on wondering at things grown familiar, doesn't last forever, unless you happen to have genius. Nothing in my life nowadays takes the place left empty by that humming-bird. Engines more powerful than the Corliss may be new inventions, but they are an old story. Very wisely, however, do I console myself by repeating that although magic is gone, and wonder going, disappointments too have lost their edge. I was twelve when I got my first bicycle, a high wheel with Para rubber tires and parallel bearings, nearer frictionless than cones. In the rink where I learned to mount and dismount that bicycle was perfect. It seemed to move, precisely as the advertisement had led me to hope, almost by "volition"—as to the meaning of which word I had taken advice. But on the day when I was allowed to ride it home, over city streets and suburban roads, the motion was bitterly different. Weeks were needed to make me accept this difference as part of the world.

The first chamois I saw moved quite as differently from all the chamois I had imagined. Luck brought us a good long look at him. Between the Val d'Hérémence and the Val des Bagnes, on a smooth-swelling glacier, clearly the creation of some higher mathematician, some lover of chilled lines and immense curving sérénités, surfaces poachers drove the chamois toward us, where we

of us, and made off running along the rim of the huge ice-bowl. His motion was a disillusionizer. He looked rather like a rocking-horse, or as a rocking-horse might look if it knew how to get over the ground. But my disappointment, just because I was thirty-five when I suffered it, was thin and pale and temporary. By the following morning, when I was lying on a hill on the further side of Fionney, looking at the cliff we had descended, watching the waterfall across the valley let down its arrowheaded coils, which floated away, sidelong, in spray,—by this time I had quite forgotten that chamois. At twelve I shouldn't soon have forgiven him.

Well, even now, when I have sedately schooled myself not to expect too much from chamois or bicycles, when I'm habitually convinced that a bicycle on the road isn't propelled so easily as a bicycle in a rink, when I rather pride myself on never forgetting that the world contains fewer rinks than roads, even now I'm not quite sure that there wasn't more fun in that great expectation and its deep disappointment than there would have been in a more accurate forecast, truer to real roads and real wheels. One wavers between the two beliefs—that he who expects little will not be disappointed—that he who doesn't expect more than he gets will get nothing. After all, I mightn't have worried my people into buying me a bicycle if I hadn't been illuded.

Types of illusion that persist, equally persistent types of illusion-destruction—these any one may find who looks back into childhood. There are illusions from whose destruction one dates the discovery that the world is always less simple than one is always supposing. "All Republicans are virtuous: all Democrats are wicked." For years I believed it. Shocking was the discovery that nobody else did, least of all the authority I'd imagined I had for thinking so. Yet this shock was followed close by a first glimpse of the world as a series of special cases, an impulse to note the unlikeness of similar things. Truth of the same character presented itself as sensation, and not as idea, when I spent an hour alone with a barrel of apples, and perceived for the first time, as if no one else ever had, how different was the taste of the Baldwin I was biting into from the taste of the Baldwin just consumed. On the day when I put the sensation and the idea side by side I felt an emotion of discovery.

That was one beginning of wisdom. Another dates from that important hour when I was for the first time allowed, roaming at large among our grapevines, to swallow the seeds. On the day itself a feeling of freedom, succeeded by a feeling of fulness, precluded reflection. Somewhat later it must have been, after many grapes had been bolted on many autumn afternoons, that a cloud of suspicion appeared, grew and grew gloomy, turned into a drizzle that extinguished ecstasy. Suspicion became certitude; pleasure in swallowing the seeds was freedom from the humiliating obligation to spit them out. Separation of seeds from pulp with one's tongue, so soon as the act lost all taint of duty, acquired sensuous merits.

If one had the time and space, and one's readers the patience, it might be possible to track each of one's wisdoms to its source in some early childish incident. Often the sudden sight of a wisdom at work calls up the shadow-casting incident without effort. But I don't insist, lest