

## Books and Things

**H**AS any Ibsen play altered more than "The Wild Duck," which has lately been given in German at the Irving Place Theatre?

Recollect, if you are old enough, the late eighties, when stray copies of a German translation began to find their way about the United States. In those early days the American readers of Ibsen were not many, and each of them felt himself more or less bound to see furthest into the stoniest wall. Most of us could not see into "The Wild Duck," no matter how hard we tried. Our failure left us dejected and rather indignant. We took to calling the play incomprehensible, intricately and dimly symbolic, a blend of vagueness and sneers. Perhaps Ibsen only wrote it to annoy?

A small minority, which declined to be baffled, had an idea. Look, they said, at Ibsen's last three plays. In "Ghosts" he had told truths his public could not endure to hear. In "An Enemy of the People," written when very angry and in half his customary time, he had assailed the public and glorified truth and the truth-teller. Now, in "The Wild Duck," he had chosen to make a return upon himself by exhibiting the truth-teller as a fool, a dupe, a wrecker of lives. Thus the new play, being conceived in reaction against the teaching of "An Enemy of the People," was naturally incoherent with the body of Ibsen's doctrine and an exception to the Ibsen rule. It was Ibsen's satire upon Ibsenism.

For a few years, to the best of my recollection, this explanation slowly gained ground. Then, in the early nineties, came Shaw, first in this as in so many other fields, and formulated that more general Ibsen rule to which "The Wild Duck" was not an exception at all. The play was just one more onslaught upon the kind of idealism that Ibsen had attacked again and again. It had puzzled people only because they were unprepared for the lesson in such a new form. They had been amazed and bewildered when they saw a truth-teller sitting among the mischievous idealists. They had mistakenly assumed that Ibsen counted truth-telling as an absolute virtue, good in your own house, in your neighbor's house, and about your neighbor's wife. Some persons are ready for the truth and others are not. Gregers Werle, trying to force his variety of idealism upon a family nowise fitted to receive it, destroys their happiness at the same time that he destroys their belief in their life-lie. The meaning of the play is expressed by one of the minor characters, a Dr. Relling, whose function is to rescue shipwrecked folk by throwing life-lies to them and hauling them ashore to self-respect.

How could anybody ever have been blind to the truth of this explanation? A question which "The Wild Duck" forces upon us in 1917. Why did we have to wait for Shaw's help? At the Irving Place the other day—one of the best performances I have seen there and one of the best Ibsen performances I have seen anywhere—the play explained its own meaning. In no play has Ibsen made his intentions clearer. He has scattered brightly lit signs all over the later acts, and each sign says unmistakably either "This way to the catastrophe" or "Here you have a superb view of the meaning of the play."

About 1890 we thought the wild duck itself a most remarkable bird, a mystery, a dark symbol that flashed fitfully. At the Irving Place the symbolism doesn't seem even intricate. It is elaborate, if you like, but its clearness is painstaking. Yes, I can understand how such a fool as Gregers might tell Hjalmar he was like the wild duck,

how anybody might see a likeness to the wounded wild duck in Hedwig, how Plutarch might have written parallel lives of the wild duck and old Ekdal. But one no longer needs to have these resemblances insisted on. A hint would be enough at this late day. Instead of hinting, Ibsen insists and insists upon his symbol until he has turned it into a commodious allegory, which loses all mystery after he has shown us round it a few times.

Nevertheless, "The Wild Duck" is still what we first thought it, one of the strangest of Ibsen's plays. But with a difference. Those things in it which once appeared strange because we found them obscure have grown all too clear, so that it is the emphasis upon them, the space they take up, their importance to Ibsen himself, which now seem strange to our misdirected attention. For our attention is still fixed on what used to puzzle us, so that we see too plainly, through Ibsen's representations of human destinies and human nature, the bare mechanism of his demonstration and the abstract triumph of his Q. E. D.

Perhaps we should not feel this so keenly if the characters here were not so simple and so readily comprehended, and if all except Gregers did not live so near the earth. This nearness to earth is responsible, too, for one's feeling that symbolism must be forever an alien outsider among human beings such as these. No air can be too heavily charged with symbols for Ulric Brendel or the Rat-Wife to breathe it comfortably, but symbols and Gina Ekdal belong in different universes. Woe, however, to any producer who tries to diminish the symbolism by effacing the wild duck itself. You cannot treat Ibsen so. His work is too organic. We must hear all about the wild duck if we are to understand Hedwig's emotional life—where one of her childish treasures is, and part of her childlike heart. One of the most touching children in the world, and she touches us by the simplest means. She does not know that she is going blind. The sources of her joys are few, even with the wild duck to comfort her and with her mother's love to eat like daily bread. She owes her most tremulous hopes and all her deep disappointments to her father, whose self-love does not think of her but follows its own law, making promises to her and forgetting them, drawing her to him and pushing her away.

Her father's self-love—if Hjalmar be her father—is warm and rich and genial. It is poured out in an abundant stream. No tributary is too small to make it overflow. It magnifies everything it reflects. But for Gregers Werle it would have gone on endlessly and untroubled. Hjalmar is one of the great comic self-deceivers.

The many emotional discords of the play come from the juxtaposition of Hjalmar, whom we laugh at, and Hedwig, who breaks our hearts. Here the closeness of laughter and tears, instead of being the bland mixture of these ingredients that we are used to, is bitter in our mouths, as Ibsen meant it to be. After Hedwig has shot herself, and her mother and father are carrying away her dead body, it is the drunken Molvik who says: "The maid is not dead, but sleepeth." There one hears the loudest of the discords Ibsen meant us to listen to. Nobody else has written a tragic-comedy which resists so successfully every effort to separate the comic elements from the tragic.

Solness and Rebecca West and Borkman, who are sacrificed in other plays, are set above ordinary human beings by intellectual or imaginative force. What is sacrificed in "The Wild Duck" is as common as the faith of a child. And nothing is saved. Everything is in ruins, except Hjalmar's self-love.

P. L.

## The Evangelist of Mid-Europe

*Central Europe, by Frederick Naumann. Translated by Christabel Meredith. To be published about February 10th in New York by Alfred A. Knopf. \$3.00.*

"IT was in April that I conceived the plan of this book," says Naumann. "At that time fighting was still going on in the Carpathians. Our sons and sons-in-law were defending Hungary and Austria. . . ." The April he refers to is the April of almost two years past. At the Marne and again at Ypres the offensive against Britain and France had failed, and liberal Germans like Naumann thought and felt in the shadow of that defeat. Whatever his exultation may have been during the march towards Paris, it is perfectly clear that by the time the war was nine months old Naumann had concluded that Britain and Russia were unconquerable. The two things which impressed him most were the blockade of Central Europe and the weakness of Austria-Hungary. The problem he asked himself was not how would Germany conquer the world, but how Germany could survive as a great Power. He had figured up the resources of what he calls the world groups. He saw that Britain, Russia, America were all unfriendly, all richer and more populous, all potentially greater than Germany. At present, he wrote, we Germans of the Empire can make more out of little than any one of the other three; our technique is better, our pace is swifter. But they will learn. Their wealth and numbers will engulf us, for our territory is small and not overrich. And being a patriot the prospect worried him.

This was bad enough, but worse was possible. Suppose that after this war, Germany and the Dual Monarchy should allow economic interests and racial vanity to divide them, suppose the Magyars go one way and the Czechs another, and the ironmasters of Austria quarrel with their stronger competitors in Germany, suppose the old Prussian nobility should feel itself a very exclusive tribe, and Protestant Germans wish to stand off Catholic Austria. Suppose everybody in Central Europe struts about on his vested rights, his traditional privileges, his national arrogance; then, thought Naumann, where shall we be amidst superstates like Britain and Russia and America and all their satellites? No matter what Germany's enemies may have been frightened into believing about its military power, the fact was evident enough to Naumann that the present superiority is a passing phase. He knew that intrinsically a German is not braver or more efficient than his enemies, that defects of organization can be remedied, that in the end (he was thinking in historical periods) the greater mass of men and material will count. Germany alone will become a second-rate Power. Either it will be brushed aside, or if it demands a voice it will be crushed. The encirclement will be more dreadful than ever.

But if Germany and Austria-Hungary together could form a Mid-European state, and some of the surrounding neutrals were attracted to it, then a world group would exist which could share as an equal with Russia, America and the British Empire in the supreme government of the globe. By supreme government Naumann meant just what any imperialist means—prestige, trade rights, the division of backward territories. He had the usual desire to be the citizen of a state which plays a magnificent rôle in world politics. He wished to be of those who make the big decisions, not of those for whom they are made. He

believed in great nations. He was convinced that trench warfare had made the small nation indefensible except as part of a permanent coalition, that capitalism grown protectionist had made the small state economically helpless. He did not wish Germany to be a relatively small nation. Unless Mid-Europe were created this is what Germany would become, and Austria would disintegrate.

So Middle Europe must be created. "We have sat together in the war's economic prison, we have fought together, we are determined to live together!" At least, Naumann hopes they are determined to live together, and his book is a fervid appeal that they should live together. What so many outside Middle Europe have regarded as an accomplished fact, this very able German publicist regards merely as a hopeful possibility amidst terrible necessity. It is the only real gain he expects from the war. To be sure, he is deliberately vague about Antwerp, Poland, the Balkans, and Turkey in deference to the censorship, but it is clear that he regards an extension of frontiers as entirely a secondary question. Bulgaria is barely mentioned, and there is nothing about Hamburg-Bagdad. For him the essence of Middle Europe is the union of Germany and Austria-Hungary. He hopes, to be sure, that such a union would accrete some of the smaller neighboring states, but he appears to rely not on conquest, but on the centripetal power of the central mass.

Evidently experience has taught him that union will be no easy matter. He is only a little less worried than Englishmen are to-day as to whether the existing alliance will hold when the compression of war is relaxed. For him Mid-Europe is something that could be made by the generation which has suffered the same blockade and fought on the same battlefields. He is by no means certain it will be made. He is certain it will take a long time and prove to be a perplexing task, and his book is really a long pamphlet summoning the people of Middle Europe to union. It is argumentative, amiable, painfully tactful, shrewd, sentimental. It is skilful journalism, wheedling, exhorting, threatening, appealing to pride, to vanity, to historical tradition, to economic interest, to fear, to ambition. The scientific discussion is surrounded with the most ingenious effort to smooth out difficulties, overcome objections, allay suspicion. It is a summons in which political science is used to strengthen the appeal. But the motif of the book is the impulse of Mid-European unity, a rather fragile impulse, it seems, which needs much stimulation, if it is to survive. Naumann's real effort is to establish the idea, rather than to solve the problem. For the sake of the idea he argues that the problem is not insoluble.

Yet because he was writing for a very critical audience who know the realities of Mid-European politics, he was compelled to consider the immense difficulties of uniting two proud and somewhat competitive empires. His method is to name the difficulty—say, for example, the touchy nationalism of the Magyars, their fierce particularism and their economic selfishness. Having named it, he argues as persuasively as he can that coöperation would benefit all. Then he seems to hesitate. He knows that he is dealing with men who cannot see reason, who have little goodwill, and no grasp whatever of his dominating idea. Then he plays his trump card. He reminds them of Russia or of the British blockade and passes on. Wherever he feels that a special group, say a religious sect, a national cult or an industry has to be convinced, he begins with the spiritual claim, turns to concrete argument, and ends by parading the bogies of Russian numbers and British sea power.