

Mrs. Fiske on Ibsen the Popular

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WE talked of many things, Mrs. Fiske and I, as we sat at tea on a wide veranda one afternoon last Summer. It looked out lazily across a sunlit valley, the coziest valley in New Jersey. A huge dog that lay sprawled at her feet was unspeakably bored by the proceedings. He was a recruit from the Bide-a-wee Home, this fellow, a Great Dane with just enough of other strains in his blood to remind him that (like the Danes at Mr. Wopsle's Elsinore) he had but recently come up from the people. It kept him modest, anxious to please, polite. So Zak rarely interrupted, save when, at times, he would suggestively extract his rubber ball from the pocket of her knitted jacket and thus artfully invite her to a mad game on the lawn.

We talked of many things—of Duse and St. Teresa and Eva Booth and Ibsen. When we were speaking casually and quite idly of Ibsen, I chanced to voice the prevailing idea that, even with the least popular of his plays, she had always had, at all events, the satisfaction of a great *succès d'estime*. I could have told merely by the way her extraordinarily eloquent fan came into play at that moment that the conversation was no longer idle.

"*Succès d'estime!*" she exclaimed with fine scorn. "Stuff and nonsense! Stuff, my friend, and nonsense."

And we were off.

"I have always been *embarrassed* by the apparently general disposition to speak of our many seasons with Ibsen as an heroic adventure,—as a *series* of heroic adventures, just as though we had suffered all the woes of pioneers in carrying his plays to the uttermost reaches of the continent. This is a charming light to cast upon *us*, but it is quite unfair to a great genius who has given us money as well as inexhaustible inspiration. It is unfair to Ibsen. I was really quite taken aback not long ago when the editor of a Western paper wrote of the fortune we had lost in introducing the Norwegian to America. I wish I knew some way to shatter forever this monstrous idea. Save for the first season of 'A Doll's House,' many years ago, our Ibsen seasons have invariably been profitable. Now and

then, it is true, the engagement of an Ibsen play in this city or that would be unprofitable, but never, since the first, have we known an unprofitable Ibsen year.

"When I listen, as I have so often had to listen, to the ill-considered comments of the unthinking and the uninformed, when I listen to airily expressed opinions based on no real knowledge of Ibsen's history in this country, no real understanding whatever, I am silent, but I like to recall a certain final matinée of 'Rosmersholm' at the huge Grand Opera House in Chicago, when the audience crowded the theater from pit to dome, when the stairways were literally packed with people standing, and when every space in the aisles was filled with chairs, for at that time chairs were allowed in the aisles. And I like to remember the quality of that great audience. It was the sort of audience one would find at a symphony concert, an audience silent and absorbed, an overwhelming rebuke to the flippant scoffers who are ignorant of the ever-increasing power of the great theater iconoclast."

And so, quite by accident, I discovered that, just as you have only to whisper Chatterton's old heresy, "Shakespeare spells ruin," to move William Winter to the immediate composition of three impassioned articles, so you have only to question the breadth of Ibsen's appeal to bring Mrs. Fiske rallying to his defense. Then she, who has a baffling way of forgetting the theater's very existence and would always far rather talk of saints or dogs or the breathless magic of Adirondack nights, will return to the stage. So it happened that that afternoon over the tea-cups we went back over many seasons—"A Doll's House," "Hedda Gabler," "Rosmersholm" and "The Pillars of Society."

"As I say," she explained, "'A Doll's House' in its first season was not profitable; but, then, that was my own first season as Mrs. Fiske, and it was but one of a number of plays in a financially unsuccessful repertory. And even that, I suppose, was, from the shrewdest business point of view, a sound investment in reputation. It was a *wise* thing to do. But the real disaster was predicted by every one for 'Rosmersholm.' There was the most somber and most complex tragedy of its period. No one would go to see *that*, they said, and I am still exasperated from time to time by finding evidences of a hazy notion that it did not prosper. 'Rosmersholm' was played, and not particularly

well played, either, for one hundred and ninety-nine consecutive performances at a profit of \$40,000. I am never greatly interested in figures, but I had the curiosity to make sure of these. Of course that is a total of many profitable weeks and some unprofitable ones and of course it is not an overpowering reward for a half-season in the theater. In telling you that Ibsen may be profitable in a money sense, I am not so mad as to say other things may not be far more profitable. But \$40,000 profit scarcely spells ruin.

"And I tell you all this because it is so discouraging to the Ibsen enthusiasts to have the baseless, the *false* idea persist that he and the box-office are at odds. Sensibly projected in the theater—"

"Instead," I suggested, "of being played by strange people at still stranger matinées—"

"Of course. Rightly projected in the theater, Ibsen always has paid and always will. And that is worth shouting from the housetops, because sensibly and rightly projected in the theater, the fine thing always does pay. Oh, I have no patience with those who descend upon a great play, produce it without understanding, and then, because disaster overtakes it, throw up their hands and say there is no public for fine art. How absurd! In New York alone there are two universities, a college or two, and no end of schools. What more responsive public could our producers ask? But let us remember that the greater the play, the more carefully must it be directed and acted, and that for every production in the theater there is a psychologically *right* moment. Move wisely in these things, and the public will not fail."

For many false but wide-spread impressions of Ibsen we were inclined to blame somewhat the reams of nonsense that have been written and rewritten about him, the innumerable little essays on his gloom.

"And none at all on his warmth, his gaiety, his infinite humanity," said Mrs. Fiske, her eyes sparkling. "When will the real book of Ibsen criticism find its way to the shelf? How can we persuade people to turn back to the *plays* and re-read them for the color, the romance, the *life* there is in them? Where in all the world of modern drama, for instance, is there a comedy

so buoyant, so dazzlingly joyous as 'An Enemy of the People'?"

"They say he is parochial," I ventured.

"Let them say. They said it of *Hedda*, but that poor, empty, little Norwegian neurotic has been recognized all over the world. The trouble with *Hedda* is not that she is parochial, but that she *is* poor and empty. She was fascinating to play, and I suppose that every actress goes through the phase of being especially attracted by such characters, a part of the phase when the eagerness to 'study life' takes the form of an interest in the eccentric, abnormal, distorted—the *perverted* aspects of life. As a rôle *Hedda* is a marvelous portrait; as a person she is empty. After all, the empty evil, selfish persons are not worth our time—either yours or mine—in the theater any more than in life. They do not matter. They do not count. They are enormously unimportant. On the highway of life the *Hedda Gablers* are just so much *impedimenta*."

"Do you recall," I inquired, "that that is the very word Cæsar used for 'baggage'?"

Whereat Mrs. Fiske smiled so approvingly that I knew poor *Hedda* would be "impedimenta" to the end of the chapter.

"But she is universal," said Mrs. Fiske, suddenly remembering that some one had dared to call Ibsen parochial. "She was recognized all over the world. London saw her at every dinner-table, and I have watched a great auditorium in the far West—a place as large as our Metropolitan—held enthralled by that brilliant comedy."

"Which I myself have seen played as tragedy."

"Of course you have," she answered in triumph. "And that is precisely the trouble. When you think how shockingly Ibsen has been misinterpreted and mangled, it is scarcely surprising that there are not a dozen of his plays occupying theaters in New York at this time. It is only surprising he has lived to tell the tale. Small wonder he has been roundly abused."

And I mentioned one performance of "John Gabriel Borkmann" in which only the central figure was adequately played and which moved one of the newspaper scribes to an outburst against, not the players, but against Ibsen as the "sick man of the theater."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Fiske. "And so it has always gone. Ibsen's plays are too majestic and too complex to be so maltreated. To read 'Borkmann' in the light of some knowledge of life is to marvel at the blending of human insight and poetic feeling. How beautiful, how wonderful is that last walk with *Ella* through the mists! But played without understanding, this and the others are less than nothing at all. Yet with the published texts in every bookstore, there is no excuse for any of us blaming the outrage on Ibsen. We would attend a high-school orchestra's performance of a Wagnerian score and blame the result on Wagner. Or would we? We would have once."

And we paused to recall how curiously alike had been the advent and development of these two giants as irresistible forces.

"It was not so very long ago," said Mrs. Fiske with great satisfaction, "that a goodly number of well-meaning people dismissed Wagner with tolerant smiles. There is a goodly number of the same sort of people who still wave Ibsen away. Extraordinary questions are still asked with regard to him. The same sort of dazing questions, I suppose, were once asked about Wagner. I myself have been asked, 'Why do you like Ibsen?' And to such a question, after the first staggering moment, one perhaps finds voice to ask in return, 'Why do you like the ocean?' Or, 'Why do you like a sunrise above the mountain peak?' Or, possibly, 'What do you find interesting in Niagara?'"

"But, then, the key is given in those delightful letters after 'An Enemy of the People.' You remember Ibsen admitted there that his abhorred 'compact majority' eventually gathered and stood behind each of his drama messages; but the trouble was that by the time it did arrive he himself was away on ahead—somewhere else."

And we went back with considerable enjoyment to the days when Ibsen was a new thing outside Germany and his own Scandinavia, when his influence had not yet transformed the entire theater of the Western world, remodeling its very architecture, and reaching so far that never a pot-boiling playwright in America today but writes differently than he would have written if Ibsen—or *an* Ibsen—had not written first. Then we moved gaily on to the Manhattan Theater in the days when

the Fiskes first assumed control. It seems that on that occasion, Mr. Fiske consulted one of the most distinguished writers on the American theater for suggestions as to the plays that might well be included in Mrs. Fiske's program. And the answer, after making several suggestions, wound up by expressing the hope that, at all events, they would have nothing to do with "the unspeakable Mr. Ibsen."

And so at the first night of "Hedda Gabler"—that brilliant première which Mrs. Fiske always recalls as literally an ovation for William B. Mack and Carlotta Nillson, eleventh-hour choices both—there was nothing for the aforesaid writer to do but to stand in the lobby and mutter unprintable nothings about the taste, personal appearance, and moral character of those who were misguidedly crowding to the doors. But what had he *wanted* her to play? The recollection was quite too much for Mrs. Fiske.

"You'll never believe me," she said, amid her laughter. "But he suggested *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, *Mrs. Haller*, and *Pauline* in 'The Lady of Lyons.'"

A good deal of water has passed under the bridge since then, but even when the Fiskes came to give "Rosmersholm" there was enough lingering heresy to make them want to give that most difficult of them all a production so perfect that none could miss its meaning or escape its spell.

"I had set my heart on it," she said sadly. "It was to have been our great work. I was bound that 'Rosmersholm' should be right if we had to go to the ends of the earth for our cast. Mr. Fiske agreed. I do not know what other manager there has been in our time from whom I could have had such whole-hearted coöperation in the quest of the fine thing. Mr. Fiske has been my artistic backbone. His theater knowledge, taste, and culture, his steadiness, have balanced my own carelessness. Without him I should have been obliterated long ago.

"Well, Mr. Fiske and I selected Fuller Mellish for *Kroll* in 'Rosmersholm.' He was perfect. For *Brendel* we wanted Tyrone Power, who, because *Brendel* appears in only two scenes, could not recognize the great importance of the rôle. That is a way actors have. So Mr. Arliss was *Brendel*. But we had wanted Mr. Arliss for *Mortensgård*, and of course as *Mortensgård* he would have been superb. And then there was *Rosmer*.

Spiritual, noble, the great idealist, for *Rosmer* of 'Rosmersholm' we had but one choice. It must be Forbes-Robertson. I sought Forbes-Robertson. But I suspect he thought I was quite mad. I suspect he had the British notion that Ibsen should be given only on Friday afternoons in January. I dare say he could not conceive of a successful production of 'Rosmersholm' in the *commercial* theater."

"It flourished, though."

"Yes, and it was *fairly* good. But it was not perfect. It was not *right*. The company was composed of fine actors who were, however, not all properly cast. So it did not measure up to my ideal, and I was *not* satisfied. It drew, as Ibsen always draws, on the middle-class support. It packed the balconies—to a great extent, I imagine, with Germans and Scandinavians. It pleased the Ibsen enthusiasts; but, then I am *not* an Ibsen enthusiast."

This was a little startling.

"Or, rather, have not always been," she hastened to add. "For that, you must know him thoroughly, and such knowledge comes only after an acquaintance of many years. I have not always understood him. I might as well admit," she said guiltily, "that I once wrote a preposterous article on Ibsen the pessimist, Ibsen the killjoy, an impulsive, scatter-brained article which I would read now with a certain detached wonder, feeling as you feel when you are confronted with some incredible love-letter of long ago. And just when I think it has been forgotten, buried forever in the dust of some old magazine file, some one like Mr. Huneker, whom *nothing* escapes, is sure to resurrect it and twit me good-humoredly."

That acquaintance—when did it first begin?

"Years ago," said Mrs. Fiske. "It was when I was a young girl and given to playing all manner of things all over the country. We were all imitating delightful Lotta in those days. You would never guess who sent it to me. Lawrence Barrett. Not, I think, with any idea that I should play it, for I was far too young then even for *Nora*. But here was the great, strange play everyone was talking about, and it was his kindly thought, I imagine, that I should be put in touch with the new ideas. Of course it seemed very curious to me, so different from everything I had known, so utterly lacking in all we had been taught to consider important in the theater. It was not until later that

I played *Nora*—emerged from my retirement to play it at a benefit at the Empire.

“No, there was no special ardor of enthusiasm then. I came to play the other parts because, really, there was nothing else. Shakspeare was not for me, nor the standard repertory of the day. I *did* act *Frou Frou*, and I cannot *begin* to tell you how *dreadful* I was as *Frou Frou*. But I did *not* play *Camille*. As a matter of fact, I could not.”

There had to be an explanation of this. Mrs. Fiske whispered it.

“I cannot play a love scene,” she confessed. “I never could.”

So it was from such alternatives that she turned to the great Ibsen rôles—rôles with such depths of feeling, such vistas of life as must inspire and exact the best from any player anywhere in the world.

“And now to play smaller pieces seems a little petty—like drawing toy trains along little tin tracks. No work for a grown-up. And if now I speak much of Ibsen, it is because he has been *my* inspiration, because I have found in his plays that *life-sized* work that other players tell us they have found in the plays of Shakspeare.”

Life-sized work. We thought of Irving fixing twenty years as a decent minimum of time in which a man of talent could be expected to “present to the public a series of characters acted almost to perfection.” We spoke of Macready standing sadly in his dressing-room after his memorable last performance as the Prince of Denmark. “Good night, sweet Prince,” he murmured as he laid aside the velvet mantle for good and all, and then, turning to his friend, exclaimed: “Ah, I am just beginning to realize the sweetness, the tenderness, the gentleness of this dear *Hamlet*.” So we spoke of all the years of devotion Shakspeare had inspired in the players of yesterday and the day before—“inexhaustible inspiration,” such inspiration, Mrs. Fiske said, as awaits the thoughtful actor in the great rôles of Ibsen. She found it in *Nora* and *Lona* and *Hedda* and *Rebecca West*, and in other characters we have never seen her play and never *shall* see her play.

“There are,” she said, “such limitless depths to be explored. Many a play is like a painted backdrop, something to be looked at from the front. An Ibsen play is like a black forest, something you can *enter*, something you can walk about in.

There you can lose yourself: you can lose *yourself*. And once inside," she added tenderly, "you find such wonderful glades, such beautiful, *sunlit* places. And what makes each one at once so difficult to play and so fascinating to study is that Ibsen for the most part gives us only the last hours."

Ibsen gives us only the last hours. It was putting in a sentence the distinguishing factor, the substance of chapters of Ibsen criticism. Here was set forth in a few words the Norwegian's subtle and vastly complex harmonies that weave together a drama of the present and a drama of the past. As in certain plays of the great Greeks, as in "*Œdipus Tyrannus*," for instance, so in the masterpieces of the great modern, you watch the race not in an observation train, but from the vantage-point of one posted near the goal. Your first glance into one of these forbidding households shows only a serene surface. It is the calm before the storm—what Mrs. Fiske likes to call "the *ominous* calm." Then rapidly as the play unfolds, the past overtakes these people. You meet the scheming *Hedda* on the day of her return from her wedding trip. In little more than twenty-four hours all she has ever been makes her kill herself. An ironic story of twenty years' accumulation comes to its climax in as many hours. You have arrived just in time to witness the end.

"Back of these Ibsen men and women," I put in tentatively, "there are dancing shadows on the wall that play an accompaniment to the unfolding of the play."

"A nightmare accompaniment," Mrs. Fiske assented. "Often he gives us only the last hours, and that, my friend, is why, in the study of Ibsen, I had to devise what was, for me, a new method. To learn what *Hedda was*, I had to imagine all that she had ever *been*. By the keys he provides you can unlock her past. He gives us the last hours: we must recreate all that have gone before.

"It soon dawned on me that studying *Hedda* would mean more than merely memorizing the lines. I had a whole summer for the work—a summer my cousin and I spent in all the odd corners of Europe. And so, at even odder moments, in out-of-the-way places, I set my imagination to the task of recreating the life of *Hedda Gabler*. In my imagination I lived

the scenes of her girlhood with her father. I toyed with the shining pistols—”

“Those pistols that somehow symbolize so perfectly the dangers this little coward would merely play with,” I interrupted. “How much he says in how little!”

Whereupon Mrs. Fiske shook hands with me. She *is* an enthusiast.

“I staged in my own ghost theater,” she went on, “her first meeting with *Eilert Lövborg*—*Lövborg* whom *Hedda* loved, as so many women love, not with her heart, but with her nerves. I staged their first meeting and all other meetings that packed his mind and hers with imperishable memories all the rest of their days. I staged them as we sat in funny little German chapels or sailed down the Rhine. I spent the summer with *Hedda Gabler*, and when it came time to sail for home I knew her as well as I knew myself. There was nothing about her I did *not* know, nothing she could do that I could not guess, no genuine play about her—Ibsen’s or another’s—that would not play itself without invention. I had *lived Hedda Gabler*.”

“It must have been pleasant for Miss Stevens,” I hazarded.

Mrs. Fiske laughed gaily.

“Poor Cousin Emily!” she said. “I remember how biting she was one afternoon after she had been kept waiting an hour outside a little Swiss hotel while I was locked in the parlor, pacing up and down in the midst of a stormy scene with *Lövborg*.”

“And so,” she went on, “if *Hedda*, and better still, if both *Hedda* and *Lövborg*, have been studied in this way, the moment in the second act when these two come face to face after all their years of separation is for each player a tremendous moment. To *Hedda* the very sight of *Lövborg* standing there on the threshold of her drawing-room brings a flood of old memories crowding close. It must not show on the surface. That is not Ibsen’s way. There are others—alien spirits—present, and *Hedda* is the personification of fastidious self-control. She has sacrificed everything for that. No, it may not show on the surface, but if the actress has lived through *Hedda’s* past, and so realized her present, that moment is electrical. Her blood quickens, her voice deepens, her eyes shine. A curious magnetic something passes between her and

Lövborg. And the playgoer, though he has but dimly guessed all that *Hedda* and *Lövborg* have meant to each other, is touched by that current. For him, too, the moment is electrical."

"Taking," I suggested, "its significance, its beauty, its dramatic force from all that has gone before."

"From all the untold hours," said Mrs. Fiske. "And see how wonderfully it sharpens the brilliant comedy of that scene where *Hedda* and *Lövborg* are whispering cryptically across the photograph-album while the others chatter unconsciously about them. Think how significant every tone and glance and gesture become if these two have in their mental backgrounds those old afternoons when *General Gabler* would fall asleep over his newspaper and he and she would be left to talk together in the old parlor.

"And I must admit," she added, with a twinkle, "that in those recreations, *Lövborg* was sometimes quite unmanageable. He would behave very badly."

"Like *Colonel Newcome*," I exclaimed.

"Not at *all* like *Colonel Newcome*. What *do* you mean?"

"Exactly like," I went on enthusiastically. "Do you remember that time when, in the days Thackeray was deep in 'The Newcomes,' his hostess at breakfast asked him cheerily if he had had a good night? A good night! 'How could I?' he answered, 'with *Colonel Newcome* making such a fool of himself?' 'But why do you let him?' This, of course, from his bewildered hostess. 'Oh! It was in him to do it. He must.'"

"Thackeray understood," Mrs. Fiske agreed. "But I wonder if he really thought the death scene—the '*Ad-sum*' scene—intrinsically beautiful."

"I suspect so," I said. "It was the only part of the book he could not dictate. He had to write that alone. Anyway, Mr. Saintsbury thinks that *Lear's* is the only death scene that surpasses it in literature."

"Yet is it not so beautiful and so touching because of all that has gone before, because of all the affection for dear *Colonel Newcome* you have acquired in a thousand pages of sympathy? So it is, at least, with the great scenes in Ibsen, meaningless, valueless except in the light of what has gone before. He gives us the last hours. Behind each is a lifetime.

"And think how valuable is such a method of study in a play

like 'Rosmersholm,' how impossible for one to play *Rebecca* until one has lived through the years with the dead *Beata Rosmer's* wife has already passed on before the first curtain rises, but from then on, nevertheless, she plays an intense rôle. She lives in the minds of those at Rosmersholm, in the very hearts of those who play the tragedy.

"And how crucially important it is that the *Rebecca* should have thought out all her past with *Dr. West!* It is the illumination of that past which she comes upon unexpectedly in a truth let fall by the unconscious *Kroll*—a truth so significant that it shatters her ambitions, sends her great house of cards toppling about her ears, touches the spring of her confession, and brings the tragedy to its swift, inevitable conclusion. Now, unless an actress be one of those rare artists who can put on and take off their emotions like so many bonnets, I do not see how she could make this scene *intelligible* unless she had perceived and felt its hidden meaning; nor how, having perceived and felt it, she could help playing it well. If her own response is right, the playgoer will be carried along without himself having quite understood the reason for her confession. This is curious, but it is true. I am sure of it. For, as a matter of fact, few *have* caught the half-revealed meaning of that scene between *Rebecca* and *Kroll*. It is one of the inexplicable stench that *do* rise occasionally from Ibsen's play—like another in the otherwise beautiful 'Lady from the Sea.' It assailed me so directly that for a long time I hesitated to produce 'Rosmersholm' at all. Yet, of all the writers in America only two seemed to have been aware of it.

"But if the actress has not searched *Rebecca's* past, the key to the scene is missing. The actress must *know*, and, knowing, her performance will take care of itself. Go to the theater well versed in the *science* of acting, and knowing thoroughly the person Ibsen has created, and you need take no thought of how this is to be said or how that is to be indicated. You can *live* the play."

But with shallower pieces, with characters that come meaningless out of nowhere, could she follow this method of study?

"It would be a mountain bringing forth a mouse," she admitted; "and yet I suppose that now I always try it."

And it occurred to me that probably that delightful con-

fession of *Erstwhile Susan's* in her present play—that harrowing return to the closed chapter back in the op'ry-house at Cedar Center when the faithless *Bert Budsaw* had deserted her at the altar—had probably crept into the comedy during Mrs. Fiske's own quest of a background for the lady elocutionist. I tried to find out, but she gave only an inscrutable smile, expended largely on Zak who was visibly depressed.

"If it is a real part in a real play," she said sternly. "That is the way to study it."

At this point Zak, who is always right in a matter of manners, rose and stared at me in such an expertly dismissive way that there was simply no escaping the suggestion. I started to go.

"And that," I concluded from the steps, "is the method of study you would recommend to all young players?"

"Indeed, indeed it is," said Mrs. Fiske, with great conviction. "I should urge, I should *inspire* my students to follow it if ever I had a dramatic school."

A dramatic school, Mrs. Fiske's dramatic school. But that is another story—the next, in fact.