

**GHOSTS, THE WARRIORS
AT HELGELAND, AN
ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE**

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Ghosts, The warriors at Helgeland, an enemy of the people by Henrik Ibsen

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HENRIK IBSEN

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HENRIK IBSEN, born at Skien, Norway, on 20th March 1828. Obtained work in connection with theatres in Bergen and Christiania. Left Norway in 1864 and lived abroad—mostly in Germany—returning to Norway in 1891. Died at Christiania on 23rd May 1906.

HENRIK IBSEN
GHOSTS

THE WARRIORS AT HELGELAND

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE

TRANSLATED BY
R. FARQUHARSON SHARP



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INTRODUCTION

(Revised for the 1941 edition)

The Warriors at Helgeland (*Hærmændene paa Helgeland*), the first of the three plays included in the present volume, was written in 1857, when Ibsen (who was then in his thirtieth year) was at Christiania. Both in conception and execution it is an enormous advance on the immature efforts which had preceded it; and, apart from its own very considerable merits, poetic and dramatic, it is noteworthy as foreshadowing two aspects of the later genius that could produce *Peer Gynt* and *The Wild Duck*. Judged as a poetic romance, it has great charm if approached in the necessary spirit of simplicity. As a piece of dramatic construction it is admirable, and already characteristic of the later Ibsen in its methods. A preface which Ibsen wrote in 1876 for a German translation of the play affords interesting evidence of his sane dramatic sense. After remarking that the Volsung Saga was the source of his inspiration for the play, he goes on to say that he was nevertheless convinced that "the idealised and, to a certain extent, impersonal figures in the Sagas" were unsuitable for representation on the stage of to-day, and that, apart from this, it had been his aim in this play to present "not mythical personages, but Scandinavian life in olden times." To realise the wisdom of this, one has only to compare the human interest possessed by the characters in *The Warriors at Helgeland* with the almost entire lack of it in the heroes and heroines of Wagner's *Ring der Nibelungen*.

Ibsen offered the play to the Royal Theatre at Copenhagen and to the Christiania Theatre, and both promptly rejected it as unsuitable to the tastes of the public. It was not until 1861, after a tentative performance at Bergen, that the play was produced at the Christiania Theatre. It was not seen in Copenhagen until some fourteen years later. The publication of the translation referred to above gave the play a footing in Germany

where it was fairly often played after that date. Its only productions in London, so far, have been that at the Imperial Theatre in 1903, during Ellen Terry's management, when it was played under the title of *The Vikings*, and at the Old Vic in 1928 in connection with the celebration of the centenary of Ibsen's birth.

The remaining two plays here translated, *Ghosts* (*Gengangere*) and *An Enemy of the People* (*En Folkefiende*), are closely connected in their origin. *Ghosts* was written in 1881, when Ibsen was in Italy, and was published at the close of that year. Ibsen could not have expected—indeed did not expect—anything but a mixed reception for a play so aggressively daring in its defiance of all conventions. Thought has moved so quickly in the last sixty years, the boundary-posts (to use a favourite metaphor of Ibsen's) have been so often shifted in that time, that it requires a readjustment of one's point of view to realise fully how daring a thing it was to publish a play on such a theme as this and expect it to be performed. It is Ibsen's most remarkable polemical, and perhaps his most remarkable intellectual, effort; as a play it grips the mind and extorts a close interest despite any repugnance to its theme. Softening of the brain as the result of disease inherited from a licentious father is a subject æsthetically repulsive, and must perhaps become especially so upon the boards of a theatre. No doubt the play teaches lessons that social teachers cannot emphasise too strongly; and in none of his works has Ibsen diagnosed a social malady (a proceeding which he was fond of claiming as his aim in writing these plays) with more terrible skill. But it is still open to question whether the acted drama—which, after all, is a form of art distinguished by peculiar conditions—is a legitimate medium for the exposition of such truths. There is much virtue in the old artistic canon as to what may fitly be displayed *coram populo*.

Another criticism that may fairly be made upon *Ghosts*, judged as a play, is that it is rather too obviously a work with a didactic purpose. The dramatist seems more

interested in his thesis than in his characters. Except for the dominance of Mrs. Alving's personality, the characterisation is a shade conventional, for a writer of Ibsen's rare ability in that respect: his personages perhaps appearing to expound the dramatist's views rather than voice thoughts that are their own. And yet Ibsen wrote to a friend of his, at this time, that "in none of his plays did the author stand so entirely apart from the action as in *Ghosts*"!

However prepared he may have thought he was for the reception of the play, Ibsen was nevertheless considerably taken aback by the bitter storm of abuse it aroused in Norway. Björnson was the only public man who would say a word in his defence; and the "Liberal" press, on whose professions of broadmindedness Ibsen had more or less relied, threw him over altogether. The result was the writing, at white heat, of *An Enemy of the People*, in which Ibsen sought to chastise his opponents with satire. Dr. Stockmann, the protagonist of the play, is not intended as a portrait of the author; but the picture of his relations to his fellow-townsmen, to the Liberal press, and to the "damned compact majority"—his account of himself as "fighting at the outposts of thought," and standing at a point which in ten years' time the majority would have reached, while he himself would be far ahead again—obviously depict Ibsen's own position towards his countrymen in the matter of *Ghosts*. Writing to his friend Brandes at this time about the controversy, Ibsen complains of the Liberal press prating of freedom of action and thought, and then letting themselves become merely the slaves of their subscribers' opinions and following the crowd instead of leading it; and, again, writes of himself as being always ten years ahead of the great mass of the people—expressions identical with those used by Dr. Stockmann.

Despite its satirical intention, *An Enemy of the People* is in many ways more genial than most of Ibsen's "social dramas," thanks to the leavening of humour which he has permitted himself to mix with his scorn. The result

of this, and of the fact that the play contains some theatrically effective scenes, was that it became immediately popular on the Scandinavian stage—the audience, wherever it was played, no doubt considering the satire peculiarly applicable to any other community than their own.

Ghosts was at first refused a hearing either in Norway, Denmark or Sweden; but in 1883 the Swedish actor August Lindberg was attracted by the play's possibilities, and toured with it—with the result that soon afterwards it was played at the Royal Theatre at Stockholm. It was a good many years, however, before it was seen in Norway or in Denmark. It was first performed (privately) in Germany in 1886; in Paris, by the Théâtre Libre, in 1890; and in London, by the Independent Theatre, in 1891. Since then it has been played in most European countries. For many years the censor refused to remove his veto on its public performance in this country, possibly on account of the fact that the plot of the play involves even uglier questions than hereditary disease.

An Enemy of the People was published in the winter of 1882, and performed early the following year in Norway, Sweden and Denmark, and since then has been widely played on the continent. It was produced in England, in 1893, at the Haymarket Theatre, by Sir (then Mr.) Herbert Beerbohm Tree, who more than once revived it.

For the verse translation of Örnulf's funeral chant over his dead sons in Act IV. of *The Warriors at Helgeland*, I am indebted to the kindness of Mr. Ernest Rhys.

R. FARQUHARSON SHARP.