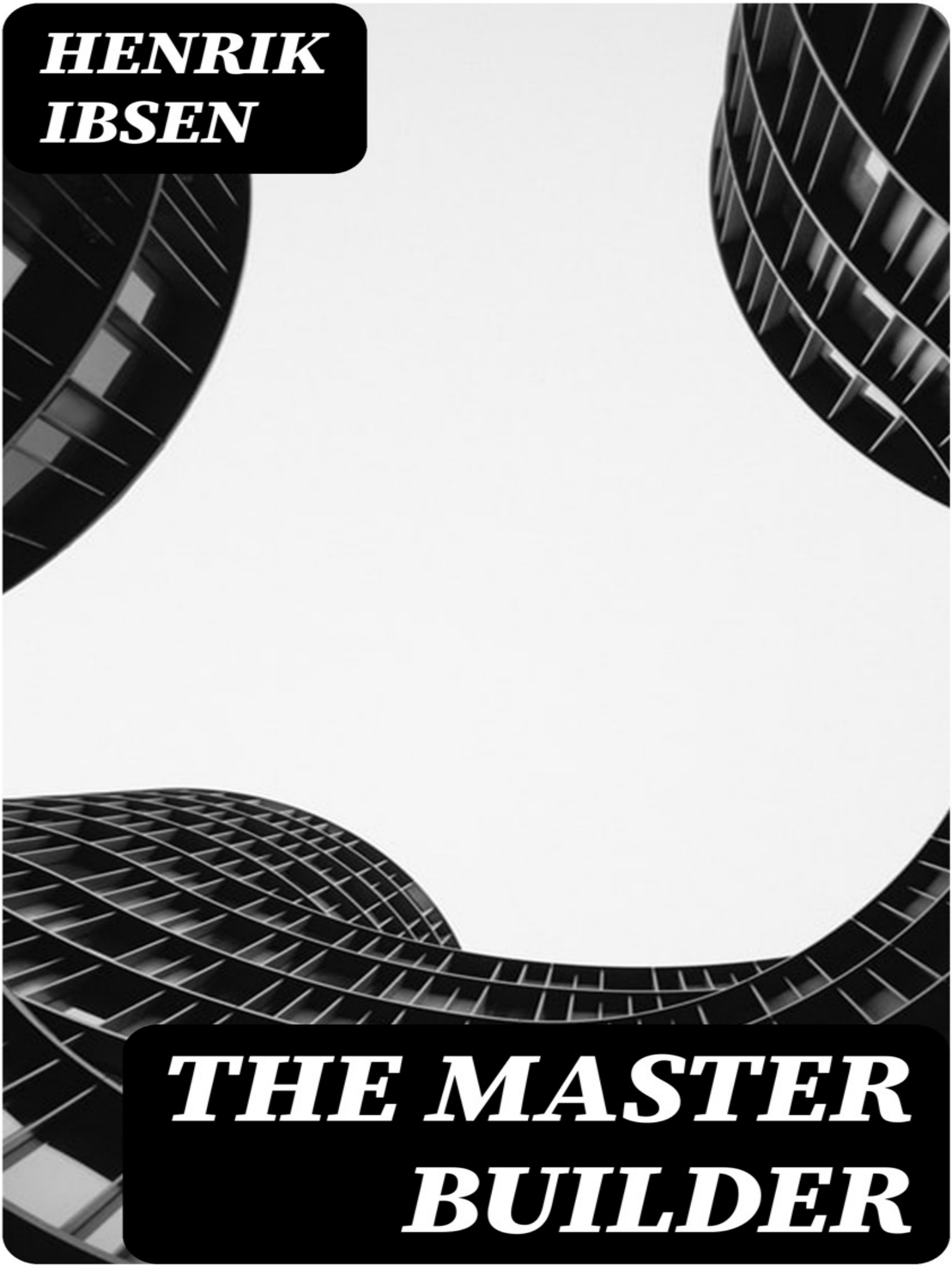
HENRIK IBSEN



THE MASTER BUILDER

Henrik Ibsen

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INTRODUCTION by William Archer

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With *The Master Builder*—or *Master Builder Solness*, as the title runs in the original—we enter upon the final stage in Ibsen's career. "You are essentially right," the poet wrote to Count Prozor in March 1900, "when you say that the series which closes with the Epilogue (*When We Dead Awaken*) began with *Master Builder Solness*."

"Ibsen," says Dr. Brahm, "wrote in Christiania all the four works which he thus seems to bracket together—*Solness*, *Eyolf*, *Borkman*, and *When We Dead Awaken*. He returned to Norway in July 1891, for a stay of indefinite length; but the restless wanderer over Europe was destined to leave his home no more.... He had not returned, however, to throw himself, as of old, into the battle of the passing day. Polemics are entirely absent from the poetry of his old age. He leaves the State and Society at peace. He who had departed as the creator of Falk [in *Love's Comedy*] now, on his return, gazes into the secret places of human nature and the wonder of his own soul."

Dr. Brahm, however, seems to be mistaken in thinking that Ibsen returned to Norway with no definite intention of settling down. Dr. Julius Elias (an excellent authority) reports that shortly before Ibsen left Munich in 1891, he remarked one day, "I must get back to the North!" "Is that a sudden impulse?" asked Elias. "Oh no," was the reply; "I want to be a good head of a household and have my affairs in order. To that end I must consolidate may property, lay it down in good securities, and get it under control—and that one can

best do where one has rights of citizenship." Some critics will no doubt be shocked to find the poet whom they have written down an "anarchist" confessing such bourgeois motives.

After his return to Norway, Ibsen's correspondence became very scant, and we have no letters dating from the period when he was at work on *The Master Builder*. On the other hand, we possess a curious lyrical prelude to the play, which he put on paper on March 16, 1892. It is said to have been his habit, before setting to work on a play, to "crystallise in a poem the mood which then possessed him;" but the following is the only one of these keynote poems which has been published. I give it in the original language, with a literal translation:

DE SAD DER, DE TO—
De sad der, de to, i saa lunt et hus
ved host og i venterdage,
Saa braendte huset. Alt ligger i grus.
De to faar i asken rage.

For nede id en er et smykke gemt,—
et smykke, som aldrig kan braende.
Og leder de trofast, haender det nemt
at det findes af ham eller hende.

Men finder de end, brandlidte to,
det dyre, ildfaste smykke,—
aldrig han finder sin braendte tro,
han aldrig sin braendte lykke.

THEY SAT THERE, THE TWO—
They sat there, the two, in so cosy a house, through autumn and winter days. Then the house burned down. Everything lies in ruins. The two must grope among the ashes.

For among them is hidden a jewel—a jewel that never can burn.
And if they search faithfully, it may easily happen that he or she may find it.

But even should they find it, the burnt-out two—find this precious unburnable jewel—never will she find her burnt faith,
he never his burnt happiness.

This is the latest piece of Ibsen's verse that has been given to the world; but one of his earliest poems—first printed in 1858—was also, in some sort, a prelude to *The Master Builder*. Of this a literal translation may suffice. It is called,

BUILDING-PLANS

I remember as clearly as if it had been to-day the evening when, in the paper, I saw my first poem in print. There I sat in my den, and, with long-drawn puffs, I smoked and I dreamed in blissful self-complacency.

"I will build a cloud-castle. It shall shine all over the North. It shall have two wings: one little and one great. The great wing shall shelter a deathless poet; the little wing shall serve as a young girl's bower."

The plan seemed to me nobly harmonious; but as time went on
it fell into confusion. When the master grew reasonable, the castle turned utterly crazy; the great wing became too little, the little wing fell to ruin.

Thus we see that, thirty-five years before the date of *The Master Builder*, Ibsen's imagination was preoccupied with a

symbol of a master building a castle in the air, and a young girl in one of its towers.

There has been some competition among the poet's young lady friends for the honour of having served as his model for Hilda. Several, no doubt, are entitled to some share in it. One is not surprised to learn that among the papers he left behind were sheaves upon sheaves of letters from women. "All these ladies," says Dr. Julius Elias, "demanded something of him—some cure for their agonies of soul, or for the incomprehension from which they suffered; some solution of the riddle of their nature. Almost every one of them regarded herself as a problem to which Ibsen could not but have the time and the interest to apply himself. They all thought they had a claim on the creator of Nora.... Of this chapter of his experience, Fru Ibsen spoke with ironic humour. 'Ibsen (I have often said to him), Ibsen, keep these swarms of over-strained womenfolk at arm's length.' 'Oh no (he would reply), let them alone. I want to observe them more closely.' His observations would take a longer or shorter time as the case might be, and would always contribute to some work of art."

The principal model for Hilda was doubtless Fraulein Emilie Bardach, of Vienna, whom he met at Gossensass in the autumn of 1889. He was then sixty-one years of age; she is said to have been seventeen. As the lady herself handed his letters to Dr. Brandes for publication, there can be no indiscretion in speaking of them freely. Some passages from them I have quoted in the introduction to *Hedda Gabler*—passages which show that at first the poet deliberately put aside his Gossensass impressions for use

when he should stand at a greater distance from them, and meanwhile devoted himself to work in a totally different key. On October 15, 1889, he writes, in his second letter to Fraulein Bardach: "I cannot repress my summer memories, nor do I want to. I live through my experiences again and again. To transmute it all into a poem I find, in the meantime, impossible. In the meantime? Shall I succeed in doing so some time in the future? And do I really wish to succeed? In the meantime, at any rate, I do not.... And yet it must come in time." The letters number twelve in all, and are couched in a tone of sentimental regret for the brief, bright summer days of their acquaintanceship. The keynote is struck in the inscription on the back of a photograph which he gave her before they parted: *An die Maisonne eines Septemberlebens—in Tirol*,(1) 27/9/89. In her album he had written the words:

Hohes, schmerzliches Gluck—
um das Unerreichbare zu ringen!(2)

in which we may, if we like, see a foreshadowing of the Solness frame of mind. In the fifth letter of the series he refers to her as "an enigmatic Princess"; in the sixth he twice calls her "my dear Princess"; but this is the only point at which the letters quite definitely and unmistakably point forward to *The Master Builder*. In the ninth letter (February 6, 1890) he says: "I feel it a matter of conscience to end, or at any rate, to restrict, our correspondence." The tenth letter, six months later, is one of kindly condolence on the death of the young lady's father. In the eleventh (very short) note, dated December 30, 1890, he acknowledges some small gift, but says: "Please, for the present, do not write me again.... I will soon send you my new play [*Hedda Gabler*].

Receive it in friendship, but in silence!" This injunction she apparently obeyed. When *The Master Builder* appeared, it would seem that Ibsen did not even send her a copy of the play; and we gather that he was rather annoyed when she sent him a photograph signed "Princess of Orangia." On his seventieth birthday, however, she telegraphed her congratulations, to which he returned a very cordial reply. And here their relations ended.

That she was right, however, in regarding herself as his principal model for Hilda appears from an anecdote related by Dr. Elias.(3) It is not an altogether pleasing anecdote, but Dr. Elias is an unexceptionable witness, and it can by no means be omitted from an examination into the origins of *The Master Builder*. Ibsen had come to Berlin in February 1891 for the first performance of *Hedda Gabler*. Such experiences were always a trial to him, and he felt greatly relieved when they were over. Packing, too, he detested; and Elias having helped him through this terrible ordeal, the two sat down to lunch together, while awaiting the train. An expansive mood descended upon Ibsen, and chuckling over his champagne glass, he said: "Do you know, my next play is already hovering before me—of course in vague outline. But of one thing I have got firm hold. An experience: a woman's figure. Very interesting, very interesting indeed. Again a spice of the devilry in it." Then he related how he had met in the Tyrol a Viennese girl of very remarkable character. She had at once made him her confidant. The gist of her confessions was that she did not care a bit about one day marrying a well brought-up young man—most likely she would never marry. What tempted and charmed and

delighted her was to lure other women's husbands away from them. She was a little daemonic wrecker; she often appeared to him like a little bird of prey, that would fain have made him, too, her booty. He had studied her very, very closely. For the rest, she had had no great success with him. "She did not get hold of me, but I got hold of her—for my play. Then I fancy" (here he chuckled again) "she consoled herself with some one else." Love seemed to mean for her only a sort of morbid imagination. This, however, was only one side of her nature. His little model had had a great deal of heart and of womanly understanding; and thanks to the spontaneous power she could gain over him, every woman might, if she wished it, guide some man towards the good. "Thus Ibsen spoke," says Elias, "calmly and coolly, gazing as it were into the far distance, like an artist taking an objective view of some experience—like Lubek speaking of his soul-thefts. He had stolen a soul, and put it to a double employment. Thea Elvsted and Hilda Wangel are intimately related—are, indeed only different expressions of the same nature." If Ibsen actually declared Thea and Hilda to be drawn from one model, we must of course take his word for it; but the relationship is hard to discern.

There can be no reasonable doubt, then, that the Gossensass episode gave the primary impulse to *The Master Builder*. But it seems pretty well established, too, that another lady, whom he met in Christiania after his return in 1891, also contributed largely to the character of Hilda. This may have been the reason why he resented Fraulein

Bardach's appropriating to herself the title of "Princess of Orangia."

The play was published in the middle of December 1892. It was acted both in Germany and England before it was seen in the Scandinavian capitals. Its first performance took place at the Lessing Theatre, Berlin, January 19, 1893, with Emanuel Reicher as Solness and Frl. Reisenhofer as Hilda. In London it was first performed at the Trafalgar Square Theatre (now the Duke of York's) on February 20, 1893, under the direction of Mr. Herbert Waring and Miss Elizabeth Robins, who played Solness and Hilda. This was one of the most brilliant and successful of English Ibsen productions. Miss Robins was almost an ideal Hilda, and Mr. Waring's Solness was exceedingly able. Some thirty performances were give in all, and the play was reproduced at the Opera Comique later in the season, with Mr. Lewis Waller as Solness. In the following year Miss Robins acted Hilda in Manchester. In Christiania and Copenhagen the play was produced on the same evening, March 8, 1893; the Copenhagen Solness and Hilda were Emil Poulsen and Fru Hennings. A Swedish production, by Lindberg, soon followed, both in Stockholm and Gothenburg. In Paris *Solness le constructeur* was not seen until April 3, 1894, when it was produced by "L'OEuvre" with M. Lugne-Poe as Solness. The company, sometimes with Mme. Suzanne Despres and sometimes with Mme. Berthe Bady as Hilda, in 1894 and 1895 presented the play in London, Brussels, Amsterdam, Milan, and other cities. In October 1894 they visited Christiania, where Ibsen was present at one of their performances, and is reported by Herman Bang to have

been so enraptured with it that he exclaimed, "This is the resurrection of my play!" On this occasion Mme. Bady was the Hilda. The first performance of the play in America took place at the Carnegie Lyceum, New York, on January 16, 1900, with Mr. William H. Pascoe as Solness and Miss Florence Kahn as Hilda. The performance was repeated in the course of the same month, both at Washington and Boston.

In England, and probably elsewhere as well, *The Master Builder* produced a curious double effect. It alienated many of the poet's staunchest admirers, and it powerfully attracted many people who had hitherto been hostile to him. Looking back, it is easy to see why this should have been so; for here was certainly a new thing in drama, which could not but set up many novel reactions. A greater contrast could scarcely be imagined than that between the hard, cold, precise outlines of *Hedda Gabler* and the vague mysterious atmosphere of *The Master Builder*, in which, though the dialogue is sternly restrained within the limits of prose, the art of drama seems for ever on the point of floating away to blend with the art of music. Substantially, the play is one long dialogue between Solness and Hilda; and it would be quite possible to analyse this dialogue in terms of music, noting (for example) the announcement first of this theme and then of that, the resumption and reinforcement of a theme which seemed to have been dropped, the contrapuntal interweaving of two or more motives, a scherzo here, a fugal passage there. Leaving this exercise to some one more skilled in music (or less unskilled) than myself, I may note that in *The Master Builder*

Ibsen resumes his favourite retrospective method, from which in *Hedda Gabler* he had in great measure departed. But the retrospect with which we are here concerned is purely psychological. The external events involved in it are few and simple in comparison with the external events which are successively unveiled in retrospective passages of *The Wild Duck* or *Rosmersholm*. The matter of the play is the soul-history of Halvard Solness, recounted to an impassioned listener—so impassioned, indeed, that the soul-changes it begets in her form an absorbing and thrilling drama. The graduations, retardations, accelerations of Solness's self-revealment are managed with the subtlest art, so as to keep the interest of the spectator ever on the stretch. The technical method was not new; it was simply that which Ibsen had been perfecting from *Pillars of Society* onward; but it was applied to a subject of a nature not only new to him, but new to literature.

That the play is full of symbolism it would be futile to deny; and the symbolism is mainly autobiographic. The churches which Solness sets out building doubtless represent Ibsen's early romantic plays, the "homes for human beings" his social drama; while the houses with high towers, merging into "castles in the air," stand for those spiritual dramas, with a wide outlook over the metaphysical environment of humanity, on which he was henceforth to be engaged. Perhaps it is not altogether fanciful to read a personal reference into Solness's refusal to call himself an architect, on the ground that his training has not been systematic—that he is a self-taught man. Ibsen too was in all essentials self-taught; his philosophy was entirely

unsystematic; and, like Solness, he was no student of books. There may be an introspective note also in that dread of the younger generation to which Solness confesses. It is certain that the old Master-Builder was not lavish of his certificates of competence to young aspirants, though there is nothing to show that his reticence ever depressed or quenched any rising genius.

On the whole, then, it cannot be doubted that several symbolic motives are inwoven into the iridescent fabric of the play. But it is a great mistake to regard it as essentially and inseparably a piece of symbolism. Essentially it is a history of a sickly conscience, worked out in terms of pure psychology. Or rather, it is a study of a sickly and a robust conscience side by side. "The conscience is very conservative," Ibsen has somewhere said; and here Solness's conservatism is contrasted with Hilda's radicalism —or rather would-be radicalism, for we are led to suspect, towards the close, that the radical too is a conservative in spite or herself. The fact that Solness cannot climb as high as he builds implies, I take it, that he cannot act as freely as he thinks, or as Hilda would goad him into thinking. At such an altitude his conscience would turn dizzy, and life would become impossible to him. But here I am straying back to the interpretation of symbols. My present purpose is to insist that there is nothing in the play which has no meaning on the natural-psychological plane, and absolutely requires a symbolic interpretation to make it comprehensible. The symbols are harmonic undertones; the psychological melody is clear and consistent without any reference to them.(4) It is true that, in order to accept the action on what we may

call the realistic level, we must suppose Solness to possess and to exercise, sometimes unconsciously, a considerable measure of hypnotic power. But time is surely past when we could reckon hypnotism among "supernatural" phenomena. Whether the particular forms of hypnotic influence attributed to Solness do actually exist is a question we need not determine. The poet does not demand our absolute credence, as though he were giving evidence in the witness-box. What he requires is our imaginative acceptance of certain incidents which he purposely leaves hovering on the border between the natural and the preternatural, the explained and the unexplained. In this play, as in *The Lady from the Sea* and *Little Eyolf*, he shows a delicacy of art in his dalliance with the occult which irresistibly recalls the exquisite genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne.(5)

The critics who insist on finding nothing but symbolism in the play have fastened on Mrs. Solness's "nine lovely dolls," and provided the most amazing interpretations for them. A letter which I contributed in 1893 to the *Westminster Gazette* records an incident which throws a curious light on the subject and may be worth preserving. "At a recent first night," I wrote, "I happened to be seated just behind a well-known critic. He turned round to me and said, 'I want you to tell me what is YOUR theory of those "nine lovely dolls." Of course one can see that they are entirely symbolical.' 'I am not so sure of that,' I replied, remembering a Norwegian cousin of my own who treasured a favourite doll until she was nearer thirty than twenty. 'They of course symbolise the unsatisfied passion of motherhood in Mrs. Solness's heart, but I have very little doubt that Ibsen makes use of this

"symbol" because he has observed a similar case, or cases, in real life.' 'What!' cried the critic. 'He has seen a grown-up, a middle-aged woman continuing to "live with" her dolls!' I was about to say that it did not seem to me so very improbable, when a lady who was seated next me, a total stranger to both of us, leant forward and said, 'Excuse my interrupting you, but it may perhaps interest you to know that I HAVE THREE DOLLS TO WHICH I AM DEEPLY ATTACHED!' I will not be so rude as to conjecture this lady's age, but we may be sure that a very young woman would not have had the courage to make such an avowal. Does it not seem that Ibsen knows a thing or two about human nature—English as well as Norwegian—which we dramatic critics, though bound by our calling to be subtle psychologists, have not yet fathomed?" In the course of the correspondence which followed, one very apposite anecdote was quoted from an American paper, the *Argonaut*: "An old Virginia lady said to a friend, on finding a treasured old cup cracked by a careless maid, 'I know of nothing to compare with the affliction of losing a handsome piece of old china.' 'Surely,' said the friend, 'it is not so bad as losing one's children.' 'Yes, it is,' replied the old lady, 'for when your children die, you do have the consolations of religion, you know.'"

It would be a paradox to call *The Master Builder* Ibsen's greatest work, but one of his three or four greatest it assuredly is. Of all his writings, it is probably the most original, the most individual, the most unlike any other drama by any other writer. The form of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* was doubtless suggested by other dramatic poems—notably