

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER NORA LEAVES HOME?

A talk given at the Beijing Women's
Normal College, December 26, 1923

My subject today is: What happens after Nora leaves home?

Ibsen was a Norwegian writer in the second half of the nineteenth century. All his works, apart from a few dozen poems, are dramas. Most of the dramas he wrote during one period deal with social problems and are known as social-problem plays. One of these is the play *Nora*.*

Another title for *Nora* is *Ein Puppenheim*, translated in Chinese as *A Puppet's House*. However, "puppe" are not only marionettes but also children's dolls; in a wider sense the term also includes people whose actions are controlled by others. Nora originally lives contentedly in a so-called happy home, but then she wakes up to the fact that she is simply a puppet of her husband's and her children are her puppets. So she leaves home — as the door is heard closing, the curtain falls. Since presumably you all know this play, there is no need to go into details.

What could keep Nora from leaving? Some say that Ibsen himself has supplied the answer in *The Lady from the Sea*. The heroine of this play is married but her former lover, who lives just across the sea, seeks her out suddenly to ask her to elope with him. She tells her husband

* Chinese translation for *A Doll's House*.

that she wants to meet this man and finally her husband says, "I give you complete freedom. Choose for yourself (whether to go or not). On your own head be it." This changes everything and she decides not to go. It seems from this that if Nora were to be granted similar freedom she might perhaps stay at home.

But Nora still goes away. What becomes of her afterwards Ibsen does not say, and now he is dead. Even if he were still living, he would not be obliged to give an answer. For Ibsen was writing poetry, not raising a problem for society and supplying the answer to it. This is like the golden oriole which sings because it wants to, not to amuse or benefit anyone else. Ibsen was rather lacking in worldly wisdom. It is said that when a number of women gave a banquet in his honour and their representative rose to thank him for writing *Nora*, which gave people a new insight into the social consciousness and emancipation of women, he rejoined, "I didn't write with any such ideas in mind. I was only writing poetry."

What happens after Nora leaves home? Others have also voiced their views on this. An Englishman has written a play about a modern woman who leaves home but finds no road open to her and therefore goes to the bad, ending up in a brothel. There is also a Chinese — how shall I describe him? A Shanghai man of letters, I suppose — who claims to have read a different version of the play in which Nora returns home in the end. Unfortunately no one else ever saw this edition, unless it was one sent him by Ibsen himself. But by logical deduction, Nora actually has two alternatives only: to go to the bad or to return to her husband. It is like the case of a caged bird: of course there is no freedom in the cage, but if it leaves the cage there are hawks, cats, and other hazards outside; while if imprisonment has atrophied its wings, or if it has forgotten how to fly, there certainly is nowhere it can go. Another alternative is to starve to death, but

since that means departing this life it presents no problem and no solution either.

The most painful thing in life is to wake up from a dream and find no way out. Dreamers are fortunate people. If no way out can be seen, the important thing is not to awaken the sleepers. Look at the Tang Dynasty poet Li He whose whole life was dogged by misfortune. When he lay dying he said to his mother, "The Emperor of Heaven has built a palace of white jade, Mother, and summoned me there to write something to celebrate its completion." What was this if not a lie, a dream? But this made it possible for the young man who was dying to die happily, and for the old woman who lived on to set her heart at rest. At such times there is something great about lying and dreaming. To my mind, then, if we can find no way out, what we need are dreams.

However, it won't do to dream about the future. In one of his novels Artzybashev* challenges those idealists who, in order to build a future golden world, call on many people here and now to suffer. "You promise their descendants a golden world, but what are you giving them themselves?" he demands. Something is given, of course — hope for the future. But the cost is exorbitant. For the sake of this hope, people are made more sensitive to the intensity of their misery, are awakened in spirit to see their own putrid corpses. At such times there is greatness only in lying and dreaming. To my mind, then, if we can find no way out, what we need are dreams; but not dreams of the future, just dreams of the present.

However, since Nora has awakened it is hard for her to return to the dream world; hence all she can do is to leave. After leaving, though, she can hardly avoid going to the bad or returning. Otherwise the question arises: What has she taken away with her apart from her awakened heart? If she has nothing but a crimson wool-

* Russian novelist (1878-1927).

len scarf of the kind you young ladies are wearing, even if two or three feet wide it will prove completely useless. She needs more than that, needs something in her purse. To put it bluntly, what she needs is money.

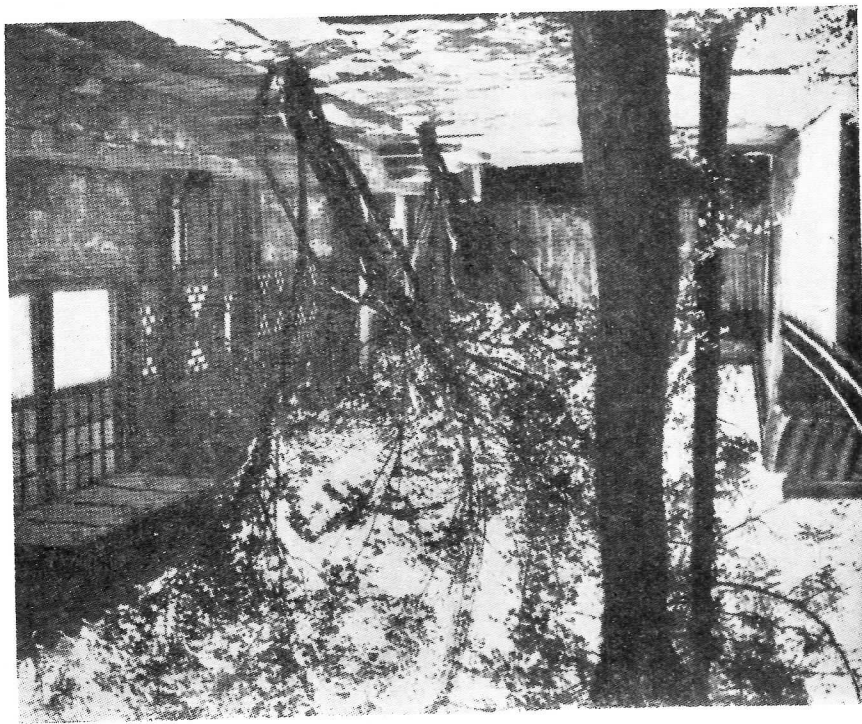
Dreams are fine; otherwise money is essential.

The word money has an ugly sound. Fine gentlemen may scoff at it, but I believe that men's views often vary, not only from day to day but from before a meal to after it. All who admit that food costs money yet call money filthy lucre will probably be found, on investigation, to have some fish or pork not yet completely digested in their stomachs. You should hear their views again after they have fasted for a day.

Thus the crucial thing for Nora is money or — to give it a more high-sounding name — economic resources. Of course money cannot buy freedom, but freedom can be sold for money. Human beings have one great drawback, which is that they often get hungry. To remedy this drawback and to avoid being puppets, the most important thing in society today seems to be economic rights. First, there must be a fair sharing out between men and women in the family; secondly, men and women must have equal rights in society.

Unfortunately I have no idea how we are to get hold of these rights; all I know is that we have to fight for them. We may even have to fight harder for these than for political rights.

The demand for economic rights is undoubtedly something very commonplace, yet it may involve more difficulties than the demand for noble political rights or for the grand emancipation of women. In this world countless small actions involve more difficulties than big actions do. In a winter like this, for instance, if we have only a single padded jacket we must choose between saving a poor man from freezing to death or sitting like Buddha under a bo-tree to ponder ways of saving all mankind. The difference between saving all mankind



The south wing of No. 11, Badawwan, Beijing, where Lu Xun lived from 1919 to 1923

and saving one individual is certainly vast. But given the choice I would not hesitate to sit down under the bo-tree, for that would obviate the need to take off my only padded jacket and freeze to death myself. This is why, at home, if you demand political rights you will not meet with much opposition, whereas if you speak about the equal distribution of wealth you will probably find yourself up against enemies, and this of course will lead to bitter fighting.

Fighting is not a good thing and we can't ask everybody to be a fighter. In that case the peaceful method is best, that is using parental authority to liberate one's children in future. Since in China parental authority is absolute, you can share out your property fairly among your children so that they enjoy equal economic rights in peace, free from conflict. They can then go to study, start a business, enjoy themselves, do something for society, or spend the lot just as they please, responsible to no one but themselves. Though this is also a rather distant dream, it is much closer than the dream of a golden age. But the first prerequisite is a good memory. A bad memory is an advantage to its owner but injurious to his descendants. The ability to forget the past enables people to free themselves gradually from the pain they once suffered; but it also often makes them repeat the mistakes of their predecessors. When a cruelly treated daughter-in-law becomes a mother-in-law, she may still treat her daughter-in-law cruelly; officials who detest students were often students who denounced officials; some parents who oppress their children now were probably rebels against their own families ten years ago. This perhaps has something to do with one's age and status; still bad memory is also a big factor here. The remedy for this is for everyone to buy a notebook and record his thoughts and actions from day to day, to serve as reference material in future when his age and status have changed. If you are annoyed with your child for want-

ing to go to the park, you can look through your notes and find an entry saying, "I want to go to the Central Park." This will at once mollify and calm you down. The same applies to other matters too.

There is a kind of hooliganism today, the essence of which is tenacity. It is said that after the Boxer Uprising some ruffians in Tianjin behaved quite lawlessly. For instance, if one were to carry luggage for you, he would demand two dollars. If you argued that it was a small piece of luggage, he would demand two dollars. If you argued that the distance was short, he would demand two dollars. If you said you didn't need him, he would still demand two dollars. Of course hooligans are not good models, yet that tenacity is most admirable. It is the same in demanding economic rights. If someone says this is old hat, tell him you want your economic rights. If he says this is too low, tell him you want your economic rights. If he says the economic system will soon be changing and there is no need to worry, tell him you want your economic rights.

Actually, today, if just one Nora left home she might not find herself in difficulties; because such a case, being so exceptional, would enlist a good deal of sympathy and certain people would help her out. To live on the sympathy of others already means having no freedom; but if a hundred Noras were to leave home, even that sympathy would diminish; while if a thousand or ten thousand were to leave, they would arouse disgust. So having economic power in your own hands is far more reliable.

Are you not a puppet then when you have economic freedom? No, you are still a puppet. But you will be less at the beck and call of others and able to control more puppets yourself. For in present-day society it is not just women who are often the puppets of men; men often control other men, and women other women, while men are often women's puppets too. This is not something

which can be remedied by a few women's possession of economic rights. However, people with empty stomachs cannot wait quietly for the arrival of a golden age; they must at least husband their last breath just as a fish in a dry rut flounders about to find a little water. So we need this relatively attainable economic power before we can devise other measures.

Of course, if the economic system changes then all this is empty talk.

In speaking as I have, however, I have assumed Nora to be an ordinary woman. If she is someone exceptional who prefers to dash off to sacrifice herself, that is a different matter. We have no right to urge people to sacrifice themselves, no right to stop them either. Besides, there are many people in the world who delight in self-sacrifice and suffering. In Europe there is a legend that when Jesus was on his way to be crucified he rested under the eaves of Ahasuerus' house, and because Ahasuerus turned Jesus away he became accursed, doomed to find no rest until the Day of Judgement. So since then Ahasuerus has been wandering, unable to rest, and he is still wandering now. Wandering is painful while resting is comfortable, so why doesn't he stop to rest? Because even if under a curse he must prefer wandering to resting; that is why he keeps up this frenzied wandering.

But this choice of sacrifice is a personal one which has nothing in common with the social commitment of revolutionaries. The masses, especially in China, are always spectators at a drama. If the victim on the stage acts heroically, they are watching a tragedy; if he shivers and shakes they are watching a comedy. Before the mutation shops in Beijing a few people often gather to gape, with evident enjoyment, at the skinning of the sheep. And this is all they get out of it if a man lays down his life. Moreover, after walking a few steps away from the scene they forget even this modicum of enjoyment.

There is nothing you can do with such people; the only way to save them is to give them no drama to watch. Thus there is no need for spectacular sacrifices; it is better to have persistent, tenacious struggle.

Unfortunately China is very hard to change. Just to move a table or overhaul a stove probably involves shedding blood; and even so, the change may not get made. Unless some great whip lashes her on the back, China will never budge. Such a whip is bound to come, I think. Whether good or bad, this whipping is bound to come. But where it will come from or how it will come I do not know exactly.

And here my talk ends.

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