

## CHAPTER 1

*Roots*

Some turn to brandy, others to lies,  
And we – well, we took to fairy tales  
Of princes and trolls and strange animals.

*Peer Gynt* 2:2 (43)

On the wall at Venstøp farmhouse, near the town of Skien, in Norway's Telemark region, hang two water-color landscapes. The artist is identified as "Henrik Ibsen's mother." Marichen Cornelia Martine Altenburg was an avid painter; more important for literary posterity, she was in love with the theatre. She worried her upright parents by attending every performance of the travelling Danish troupes, and by continuing to play with her childhood dolls when she was grown. More outrageous was her ambition to go on the stage. Accompanying herself on the piano, she loved to sing the old Telemark folk songs, performing them so well that people suspected her of a hidden connection with theatre people, a rumor she did nothing to discourage. Marichen Altenburg was small, brunette, and dark-complexioned, and the only existing likeness of her, a silhouette, bears out the tradition that she was beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

On December 1, 1825, when she was twenty-six, and he twenty-eight, Marichen Altenburg married Knud Ibsen. There is a strong tradition in Telemark that Marichen loved a man called Tormod Knudsen, but that her family had destined her for Knud Ibsen. Whether this is true or not, the marriage was an excellent family arrangement. Marichen's mother and Knud's step-father were sister and brother, and the bride and groom, who had grown up together, were practically regarded as sister and brother themselves. Marichen Altenburg was a fine catch, the daughter of one of the wealthiest merchants in the prosperous lumber town of Skien, where the enterprising Knud Ibsen ran a general store.



1. Silhouette of Marichen Altenburg Ibsen (1799–1869), Ibsen's mother, as a young woman. Artist unknown.



2. One of two surviving water-colors by Marichen Ibsen.

Ten months after her marriage, Marichen Ibsen gave birth to her first child, a boy, and eight months later was pregnant again. Henrik Ibsen's birth, on March 20, 1828, was followed three and a half weeks later by the death of his older brother. During the next seven years, Marichen Ibsen would on the average bear a child every other year, and Henrik would grow up the oldest of five children.

The young Ibsen couple lived very well in "Stockmann House" in the center of Skien, and when Henrik was three years old, they moved up the street to Marichen Ibsen's family home, "Altenburg Manor," where they lived even better. The two-storied house of ten rooms was flanked by outbuildings, including a stable that housed Marichen's and Knud's saddle horses. Knud Ibsen was socially as well as financially ambitious, and to this end "enjoyed dispensing reckless hospitality," as his famous son would later comment to Georg Brandes (*LS* 212). Altenburg Manor was known for its sumptuous dinners and holiday festivities that lasted for days. Knud Ibsen also entertained lavishly with drinking par-

ties and wolf hunts at an old farmhouse he bought at Venstøp, a few miles outside Skien.

Marichen's father, a ship-master and timber merchant, had died before her wedding and left a large private fortune. Marichen had one sister and no brothers, and thus Knud Ibsen became the "man of the house." The records of his business transactions show that by 1830, five years after his marriage, he had taken over almost all his wealthy mother-in-law's property in and around Skien, including a brewery and a profitable schnapps distillery. He no longer troubled about his general store, and began to speculate heavily in salt and timber. When his risky investments failed, he mortgaged the Altenburg properties to banks and private lenders, and by 1834, he had run out of money and was unable to pay his taxes. The authorities sealed the distillery, and the following year, the brewery was auctioned to pay Knud Ibsen's debts, and following it, Altenburg Manor. In May and June of 1835, thirty-six-year-old Marichen Ibsen, pregnant with her sixth child, saw her family home fall under the hammer, along with its "copper, brass, tin, ironware, wooden goods, bedclothes, two rare carpets together with assorted furnishings and two large looking-glasses" (Mosfjeld 69). The distillery was set to be sold at the end of the year, and the Ibsens moved in disgrace to the sole property Knud Ibsen's creditors had left them, the Venstøp farmhouse.<sup>2</sup>

Devoted to horses and hunting and his place in the world, the man who kept Christmas open house with a groaning sideboard was humiliated by his ruin. He had neither the integrity to accept the blame for his failure nor the force to start over. His love of drink, which in his palmy days was regarded as an aimable weakness, now took the form of a destructive passion for alcohol. Always an authoritarian, Knud Ibsen became a family tyrant, visiting his bitterness and resentment on his wife and children. The Ibsen biographers who had first-hand accounts of the Ibsen household hint that Knud Ibsen was physically violent; Oskar Mosfjeld, the biographer of Ibsen's boyhood, writes that his conduct "bordered on brutality" (20), and Halvdan Koht, the author of Ibsen's definitive Norwegian life, notes that "Henrik had ample opportunity to feel his father's heavy-handed insistence on obedience" (K 29).

We do not know what Marichen and Knud Ibsen's marriage was

like before they moved to Venstøp farm, but afterwards, it was one of total estrangement in which the children took the side of their mother against their father. Marichen Ibsen, whom acquaintances had consistently described as “full of life,” “merry,” and “outgoing” (Mosfjeld 27–28), was emotionally devastated by the disaster and thoroughly cowed by the man who had lost her family’s money. One neighbor who knew the Ibsens well said that Knud Ibsen “frightened [his wife] to death, so much so that she became like a changeling” (Mosfjeld 27). Bearing her husband’s abuse as best she could, Marichen Ibsen worked desperately to make ends meet and sought solace in her children, her pietist religion, and her easel.

Marichen Ibsen’s love of painting and theatre has been characterized by Hans Heiberg as a mere reflection of the times, “when refined young ladies were expected to be able to play the piano, recite, embroider, take part in amateur dramatics and also perhaps paint and draw a little” (*Ibsen* 22). Other biographers of Ibsen, including Koht and Michael Meyer, have seen in Marichen Ibsen’s drawings and water-colors the evidence of talent. We cannot know whether Marichen Ibsen might have developed as an actress or a painter if she had had the opportunity. But whatever one believes about Marichen Ibsen’s talent, or about hereditary influence on talent, what we do know is that Henrik spent hours by the side of his mother as she drew and painted, then began to draw and paint himself. Marichen Ibsen also taught the son who was said to be her favorite the pleasures of imaginary beings; Henrik passed countless hours making dolls, painting pictures of well-dressed people, glueing them on to pieces of wood and arranging them in groups. Imagining what this “cast of characters” might do, he would shake with silent laughter. From these embryonic plays, it was a small step to a puppet theatre, which people came from miles around to see. Behind a curtain, Henrik manipulated the strings of his scarlet-clad stars Fernando and Isabella. He also delighted in performing as a magician and ventriloquist, which he accomplished with the aid of his brother Nicholas, bribed for the occasion and hidden in a chest.<sup>3</sup>

If Henrik had his mother’s tastes, he also resembled her in another important way. No longer the oldest child of one of Skien’s reigning families, but of a socially degraded family banished to a rundown farmhouse, Henrik took the family disgrace



3. Oil painting of Hedvig Ibsen Stousland (1832–1920), Ibsen's sister, as a girl. Artist unknown.

hard. “Closed as an oyster” (Heiberg 29), he distanced himself from other children and from his schoolfellows, and is even said to have paid the country boys not to accompany him on the two icy miles to the schoolhouse. At home, he took refuge in a special space he claimed as his own; visitors to Venstøp farmhouse can see the little room off the back porch, a sort of closet, where he locked himself in with his dolls and paint-box. When invaded by his brothers and sister, he would drive them away in a rage. Their games bored him and interrupted his serious play.

Besides his mother, Henrik felt a close tie to one other person, his sister Hedvig, four years and eight months younger. One day he confided in her: "You know, there's a lot in the bonnet of this little Henrik Ibsen" (Mosfjeld 94). Brother and sister shared the same taste for dolls and books, including the treasure trove of volumes they had discovered in the Venstøp attic. The books had belonged to the house's former owner, a gratifyingly mysterious sailor known as "The Flying Dutchman." Most of the books were in English, but it was the illustrations that fascinated Henrik and Hedvig. A favorite volume was *A New and Universal History of the Cities of London and Westminster*, with a hundred large copper plates.<sup>4</sup>

Henrik loved learning, and dreamed of a university education. Unfortunately, to prepare himself properly for the entrance examination, he would have to attend Skien's expensive Latin School. Koht notes that Knud Ibsen could have obtained a scholarship for his talented son, but that he decided otherwise (K 33); instead, Henrik attended a cheaper school and only until he was fifteen, when he left to earn his living. The Ibsens were so poor that they often had nothing to eat but potatoes, and with Henrik gone, there would be one less mouth to feed. Knud Ibsen learned of an apprenticeship at an apothecary shop in Grimstad, and sent his son away, a hundred miles down the coast.

It is a commonplace that Knud Ibsen's financial ruin left a lasting impression on his famous son. Even as a successful author, Ibsen lived frugally, investing all the money he could. He was determined that his own son would never experience the penury and disgrace he himself had suffered. The necessity of money – its crucial connection to both respect and self-respect – figures importantly in *Peer Gynt*, *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll House*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*.<sup>5</sup>

Equally formative for Ibsen was his mother's oppression. Ibsen's sympathy with women came from his understanding of their powerlessness, and his education began at home. From the age of seven to fifteen, when he left Skien for good, Ibsen saw his father intimidate and bully his mother, who became, in the words of contemporary witnesses, more and more "taciturn," "withdrawn," and "melancholy" (Mosfjeld 26). Constant financial worries coupled with her husband's domination made Marichen Ibsen "so weighed down with sorrow and so cowed that she almost

dared not speak to people, but rather hid herself away to be as unnoticeable as possible" (Mosfjeld 26–27). Sentimentalizing her mother's depression and her submission to Knud Ibsen, Hedvig Ibsen Stousland later admiringly told Henrik Jæger, Ibsen's first Norwegian biographer, that in spite of her mother's suffering, "it was not in her to be bitter or reproachful" (Jæger 16). Hedvig's brother Henrik reacted differently. He neither forgave nor forgave his father's abuse of his mother. Bergliot Bjørnson Ibsen, Ibsen's daughter-in-law, records that even late in life Ibsen recalled with anger his father's smallest injustices and could not bear to remember his mother "succumbing to her husband's tyranny" (BI 12).

In Ibsen's very brief reminiscences of Skien, he wrote that the air "was filled all day long with the subdued roar of Long Falls, Cloister Falls, and all the many other rapids and waterfalls. And the roar was pierced from morning till night with a sound like that of shrieking and moaning women" (LS 2). Edmund Gosse, Ibsen's first English biographer, remarked that the poet's "earliest flight of fancy seems to have been this association of womanhood with the shriek of the saw-mill" (A 13:9). If Marichen Ibsen was mute, her son heard women screaming as the quintessential sound of his boyhood town.

Marichen Ibsen's pain would echo through her son's work in unremitting portrayals of suffering women: Margit of *The Feast at Solhoug*, Hjørdis of *The Vikings at Helgeland*, Helene Alving of *Ghosts*, the protagonist of *Hedda Gabler*, trapped in loveless marriages; the women of *The Pretenders*, instruments of male ambition; Agnes of *Brand*, martyred by her husband; Aase of *Peer Gynt*, impoverished and abandoned by a profligate husband; Rita of *Little Eyolf*, Ella and Gunhild Rentheim of *John Gabriel Borkman*, and Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*, deceived and utilized by ambitious men eager for fame.

Ibsen's Skien boyhood, Bergliot Ibsen comments, was the poet's "Achilles heel" (BI 94). Not long before he died, Ibsen told his niece, "It is not easy to go to Skien" (Mosfjeld 59), and in fact, Ibsen's last visit to his family was the brief trip he made at the end of his Grimstad apprenticeship. He went home only because his sister had begged him to come. He was undoubtedly reluctant to rewitness the family scenes, and he must certainly have wanted to avoid his mother's and sister's increasing devotion to an evangeli-



cal pietism he despised and to which his sister had tried to convert him in letters she sent him in Grimstad. Several days before Ibsen's arrival, the evangelist G.A. Lammers began a revival that challenged the Lutheran State Church, and Marichen and Hedvig Ibsen joined his following. We have no record of what transpired during Ibsen's visit, but it marked a complete break with his family. Almost twenty years later, when Hedvig wrote him the news of their mother's death, he waited four months to answer her, and when he did, he asked her to believe that it was not indifference that had kept him silent "all these long years." He admonished her, "Make no attempts at converting me," and had this to say about the event that had caused her to write: "So our dear old mother is dead. Thank you for having so lovingly carried out by yourself the duties which the rest of us should have shared" (*LS* 87). Ibsen closes with an admission followed by a plea: "This letter is short, and I have avoided what you perhaps wished most that I should write about. It cannot be otherwise at present. But do not think that I lack that warmth of heart which is the first requisite for a true and thriving spiritual life" (*LS* 87). Although Ibsen wants his sister to read between the lines and understand that he possesses both family feeling and human kindness, he is unwilling to give her even the partial solace of shared pain. Perhaps he knew that after twenty years of silence, expressions of grief at his mother's death would ring false. He offers the following explanation of his behavior: ". . . there is so much that stands between us, and between me and my old home" (*LS* 86).

Five years later, on the occasion of his father's death, Ibsen claimed in a letter to his uncle, whom he had not seen in twenty-seven years, that he had not written home because he could not help his parents financially. He asks his uncle to thank those who fulfilled "the duties and obligations that I myself should have carried out" (*LS* 171–72). In a clear reference to his mother's and sister's pietism, he further explains that in spite of a real desire to visit Skien, "I felt strongly disinclined to have any contact with certain tendencies that prevail there, tendencies with which I do not sympathize. A clash with them might have led to unpleasantness, which I preferred to avoid" (*LS* 172).

Ibsen's claim that his silence came from his poverty seems a poor excuse. The truth was that it was easier to be a purist of the affections, regarding separation as preferable to partial communi-

cation, than to expose himself to his mother's humiliation and his mother's and sister's pietism. Ibsen had in great supply both a reticence to display his feelings and an ability to distance himself from other people. He lived intensely, but within himself. Three years after his mother's death, Ibsen wrote to Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson: "Do you know that I have entirely separated myself forever from my own parents, from my whole family, because being only half understood was unendurable to me?" (*LS* 68).

Hedvig Ibsen Stousland took her brother as he was, reconciled with him, and eventually took an interest in his plays. Ibsen wrote her an occasional and affectionate letter, and when they became old, they exchanged visits. In his seventieth year, Ibsen sent her a photograph of himself with the following note: "Dear Sister, With this picture my most heartfelt greetings. I think the two of us have stayed close to each other. And so it will continue between us" (*H* 19:292). Excusing her brother's long silence, Hedvig Stousland explained to Koht, "It was just that it was always so difficult for him to put his feelings into words . . . That was why he could never get himself to write home."<sup>6</sup>

But putting his feelings into words was Ibsen's great gift. In a letter to Danish critic Peter Hansen on the autobiographical origins of his plays, Ibsen wrote: "For Aase [of *Peer Gynt*] my own mother – with necessary exaggerations – served as model (as she also did for Inga in *The Pretenders*)" (*LS* 102). Marichen Ibsen's ordeal is refigured in Inga's trial by fire. Inga undergoes the test to prove her son Haakon's right to the throne, only to be banished afterwards by the son she made a king. Both Francis Bull and Koht suggest that Ibsen's guilt is reflected in Haakon's for having "closed his heart to his mother" ("Henrik Ibsen" 273; K 54). If this is so, then Ibsen wishfully pardoned himself at the same time, for he has Inga declare: "No one who has so great a son can complain of being badly treated" (*H* 2:266). Marichen Ibsen's neglectful son's projection of her understanding response after he had achieved fame and fortune seems especially grievous since Ibsen, unlike his protagonist, would never reunite with his mother.

Four years after *The Pretenders*, living in Italy in self-imposed exile from Norway, Ibsen wrote one of his greatest and most autobiographical works, *Peer Gynt*, whose early scenes between Peer and Aase constitute a memorial to Marichen Ibsen written