

CHAPTER VII

OTHER PLAYS OF THE TWENTIESWindows

In the same year as the production of Loyalties, Windows was produced. Its reception was far different and its run ceased long before that of its immediate predecessor.

The theme of this play relates to that of an earlier play, The Pigeon, and concerns the failure of people who try to help the hopeless and the inferior because of misunderstanding between classes. Faith, who has served a prison - sentence for killing her two - day - old baby, is released and comes to work in the Marches house. Faith's father is the Marches' window - cleaner, and they choose to help him by giving his daughter a chance to start life anew. Faith cannot appreciate young Johnny March's attempt to make her more decent. He may succeed in changing her outside appearance but further than this he cannot reach. This is Faith's comment on his effort:

"He talks wild. Thinks he can 'rescue' me. I don't want to be rescued. I - I want to be let alone."¹

And thus, she remains a vulgar and flirtatious girl whose hunger for love and understanding compels her to leave Johnny's house where that kind of love cannot be found. The philosophy of the play is summed up by Ely, Faith's father, : " Character's born not made. You can clean yer winders and clean'em, but that don't change the colour of the glass."²

This repeats what Ferrand had said in The Pigeon ten years before:

".... They waste their time trying to make rocks white. If you do not wish of us, you have but to shut your pockets and your doors — we shall die the faster."³

There are many serious problems discussed in this play. But the atmosphere of it is somewhat similar to that of The Foundations' with Ely, the window cleaner, discussing social problems in his cockney banter. In addition to this, there is the idealistic son of the Marches', Johnny, who keeps talking about the philosophy of life in his poetically delirious way. Laughter seems to dominate the whole atmosphere of the

1. Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), p. 731

2. Ibid, p. 718

3. Ibid, p. 366

play, even at the critical moments when the situation requires deep and serious contemplation; consequently our reactions to it are confused and we are left wondering whether we are to laugh or to groan. The critics had not a little to complain about this play either. We have seen one complaint earlier in this thesis,¹ and here is another one : "This play completely baffles me (wrote Mr. St. John Ervine in the Observer). Mr. Galsworthy described it as a comedy (for realists and others), but what he meant by it I cannot imagine. It is full of fun and wit, and the situation is novel, but I do not know whether Mr. Galsworthy is making fun of the 'idealists' or 'the others' or himself."²

The Forest

Galsworthy was disappointed again when his next play The Forest was produced in 1924. The general complaint about this play is that its plot is needlessly complicated. The main idea of the play is summed up in a remark made by Tregay, a famous war - correspondent, at the beginning of Act I about a certain London big business man, Bastaple, and his way of taking advantage of others. Asking why he has been invited to come to Bastaple's place, "the lion's den,"³ as he calls it, Tregay is informed by Farrell, Bastaple's confidential man, that the business will be for his own advantage. But Tregay answers back, "Thought it might have been your chief's, Mr. Farrell; unless your City of London has changed its spots since I last saw it."⁴ The whole meaning of The Forest is that the City does not indeed change its spots, and that Bastaple is really only interested in his own advantage, even when it is a question of other people's lives.

In order to show how cruel this man is, and to illustrate the fact that he does not care how many lives are lost by his fault as long as his business and his money grow, Galsworthy wove round this character an extraordinarily complicated plot. There are too many superfluous characters with their different intentions; and we are not a little confused by Bastaple's 'anti - slave - trade' project, 'coolie labour'

1. See above, p. 20

2. St. John Ervine in The Observer, quoted in Marrot, pp. 517 - 8

3. Galsworthy : The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), p. 739

4. Ibid., p. 739

plan and so on. These unnecessarily lengthen the dialogue especially in Act I, which seems to be of comparatively little help to the development of the play.

Apart from this, the wild scenes of the African jungle in the two middle acts, though very exciting and thrilling to read, were greatly complained about by the audience because of their extreme degree of tension and brutality. Moreover there is so much contrast between the deep jungle scenes and the rest which are set in civilized London (which is, in Galsworthy's eyes, also as thick as the African forest) that we feel somewhat disconcerted by the changes from one to the other. The symbolic connection between the two, the suggestion that "big-business" is as uncivilised as life in the primeval forest, is not sufficiently explicit in the dialogue; it seems as if the full and deep meaning of the play only emerges when the text is read and pondered upon, not when it is simply acted.

However, this play is quite important in one way: i.e. in its suggestion of the possible conflict between the tribesmen and the representatives of more civilized society, a conflict which in fact actually took place afterwards: the Riff tribes of Morocco fought hard for their independence, and it was not until France and Spain joined forces with England in 1925 that the rebels were finally defeated. Events of the last few years are a further illustration.

The public did not seem to appreciate this play very much and Galsworthy was a little hurt: Here is his own complaint: "I give them something new — a play with only one woman in it, and practically no love interest—and they won't have it"¹

Old English

The Forest was followed by the production of Old English in the same year. In writing this play, Galsworthy must have had old Anthony of Strife in his mind for he is to a certain extent very similar to Hoythorp in Old English whose declaration "... and I stand or fall by it,"² indicates his chief characteristic, a stubborn determination and strong will like Anthony's.

1. Marrot, p. 542

2. Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), p. 810

Unlike Strife this play failed to attract the public; it was said to be more like a portrait than a play. However, it is a good portrait; it gives us a clear picture of Heythorp in comparison with his friend Pilling. We see Heythorp as a stout, independent, and courageous old man whose age cannot weaken his spirit nor his self - confidence while on the other hand, his friend, Pilling is a thin and sickly old man of whom the best description would be 'all to pieces at the first shot'. Pilling is a fearful man whose extreme caution often degenerates into foolish fear. However, his dislike of taking any risks grants him security whereas his fearless friend often finds himself in deep pitfalls because of his impulsive acts.

The main action of this play develops from the fact that Heythorp has an illegitimate daughter who demands help from him for the upkeep of her own children. He himself is deeply in debt, but wishes to help her in some substantial way. Being director of a board, Heythorp promises Pilling to persuade his board to buy old freighters from him on condition that Pilling gives him a large commission on the deal. Such is his influence over the board, that by strength of will he gets the resolution carried through and thus gets his commission, money which he intends for his illegitimate daughter and her children. Is Heythorp just a cunning old bully whose morals are very weak and who is neither noble nor remarkable except for his misdeeds? He has committed crime after crime in compensation for his former one; he drinks himself to death in the end after being threatened by one of his creditors that his shady dealing will be revealed unless he pays back his debt. He may truly be a more sinner. But still his tenderness towards his daughter and grandchildren under the rose, and the way he treats them with humanity are touching. Above all his strength of will is so great that it commands admiration. He is too old even to stand upright and to walk steadily; yet he struggles time after time to achieve his various purposes and yields to none. It is fantastic to see him make the last struggle before his death: though his physical strength is almost completely gone after his drinking too much brandy, he forces himself inch by inch to reach for the table where he can put the brandy bottle back because he realizes that sitting, either alive or dead, with a brandy bottle in one's arms is not suitable for a gentleman.

Although this play does not rank among Galsworthy's top plays, its chief defect being the lack of dramatic flavour, it is important for this tremendously clear portrayal of the chief character, Heythorp. In fact Heythorp's character is not a typical Galsworthy creation. He is more individualized, more alive than the central figure in many of his plays and certainly lives longer in the imagination.

The Show

Galsworthy's next play, The Show was produced in July, 1925. It is another attack on the Press and all those who enjoy prying into other people's private affairs; in The Show, it is a question of the private lives of those connected with Major Morecombe, a famous aviator, who commits suicide. In order to perform what he thinks of as his duty to the public, the newspaper reporter makes himself a great nuisance both to the 'dead man's relatives and the police and the detective on the case. When the reporter is asked to stop creating such a sensation round the dead Major and to let him rest in peace, he replies, "Unfortunately, it's my job not to".¹ The general feeling on these reporters can be summed up by the detective's remark: "Confound those fellows -- like flies, the way they buzz round a carcass."²

Such was Galsworthy's usual way of attacking people, direct, supercilious, and malevolent rather than humorous. It often caused people's resentment instead of improving them. This play was not very popular least of all among the Press. The following was the manner of its reception as described by Galsworthy himself: "My new play The Show was produced here about three weeks ago. Its theme is our modern love of sensation; and the Press, whose knuckles have been rapped (as was unavoidable), have done their best to "do it in". They have an entente cordiale with the hot weather, and the play is staggering....It seems to grip an audience all right; but since it starts with the morning after a suicide it's rather grim for July."³

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1. Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), p. 859
 2. Ibid, p. 860
 3. Marrot, p. 564

It should be noticed that in this play Galsworthy had a chance to write his favourite kind of scene, the examination scene after a crime. He seemed to enjoy writing such scenes very much and in his plays they are always rather long for Galsworthy exploited their dramatic value to the full and let his examiners, whether professional or not, make a careful and thorough examination of whomever the crime may concern. Such scenes can be found in many of Galsworthy's other plays such as Justice, A Family Man, and Loyalties.