

CHAPTER III

GALSWORTHY'S FIRST PLAYSThe Silver Box

The year 1906 is called Galsworthy's "Annus Mirabilis" because in it Galsworthy produced a great harvest of written works. Besides the publication of the novel, The Man of Property, his first play, The Silver Box was produced. Galsworthy said of it in a letter to Dr. Sadasiva Aiyar, "..... I think I can claim that The Silver Box was something really new on the English stage. It was certainly taken as such." ¹ His claim was backed by many critics one of whom has aptly said, "A playgoer accustomed to Peter Pan (1904), plays like Pinero's His House in Order (1906), felt that something new was offered by Galsworthy's The Silver Box of 1906" ²

The new thing in this play is the presentation of life as it is. There is nothing fanciful or untrue to life. Galsworthy never hesitates to reveal the darker sides of life which were kept out, as a rule, by most of the former writers.

In The Silver Box, we see how poor people carry on their lives. Galsworthy in particular is concerned with the Jones family, who, like other background characters in the play, are in a pitiful state. There are five of them altogether, two adults and three children, and here are what they have for their dinner, "Half a loaf, two onions, three potatoes and a tiny piece of bacon." ³ The lack of food and the fact that Jones has not been able to find a job for two months make it easier for him and many like him to commit a crime. However, after getting drunk and stealing a silver cigarette box from the Barthwicks' house, Jones knows that he cannot escape the hand of the law. But what irritates him is that the other man, Jack Barthwick, who committed a similar crime, can get away easily by the help of his father's powerful friend. On hearing his sentence, Jones bursts out, "Call this justice? What about 'im? 'E got drunk! 'E took the purse - 'e took the purse but [in a muffled shout] it's 'is money got' im off - Justice!" ⁴

1. Marrot, p. 793

2. Galsworthy: The Man of Property (The guide Novels, ed. N.L. Clay 1957), p. 372

3. John Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy, (1929), p. 20

4. Ibid, p. 47

This is in fact Galsworthy's own voice. He wants the readers to realize that, " 'one law for the rich, another for the poor' is true, but not because society wills it so, rather, in spite of society's good intentions, through the mere mechanical wide - branching power of money." ¹

The problems he raises in The Silver Box and also in his other plays have no solution in the plays themselves. He leaves them to the public to be solved afterwards. Like Ibsen, he considers that, as an artist, it is neither his duty nor his right to show 'the way to Heaven.' He only wishes to call attention to the fact that certain flaws are spoiling society. His method is always negative. For example, if he wants to suggest that a change for the better or a certain spirit should be developed in society, he does so by pointing out that they are lacking at present. He breaks the conventional rule by mentioning the unmentionable, the faults of society, and condemning them as seriously and persistently as he can. Galsworthy's themes remind us of Ibsen who, we may say, set out with the same purpose: attacking the morals of the respectable, showing those in high places intriguing for power, sweating the poor, transmitting venereal disease, hiding sins, and hushing up scandals.

Though Galsworthy himself denied strongly that Ibsen had any influence on him, his readers feel convinced that he in fact followed Ibsen's trend, if not consciously, then unconsciously, all along.

In several small points of technique we are reminded of this. Galsworthy for instance, like Ibsen, is very careful over details which, small as they may be, yet have considerable significance taken all together. In Act I, Scene I, the rising curtain reveals a large and well furnished dining-room of a wealthy family. Galsworthy goes into details in describing this room in which we can see, besides all the necessary furnishings, some small and luxurious things to indicate how rich this family is, such as the syphon beside a tray of whisky. His description of the Joneses' room in Act II, Scene I is also vivid and full of details. Here we can see a bare room with tattered oilcloth and damp, distempered walls in contrast to the Barthwicks' room in the former Act.

1. Marrot, p. 330

We can point out realistic details in every scene of The Silver Box. In this Scene in the second Act we see Mrs. Jones come into the room with a parcel in her arms; to show us that it was taken from the Barthwicks' house, Galsworthy makes her wrap it up in "The Times", a paper which is popular among rich and educated people. Galsworthy's attention to details is even more evident when we come to the beginning of Act II, Scene II. The Barthwicks are having their dessert, crackers, nuts etc. In order to bring us as closer to reality as he can, and in so doing, to suggest the gathering tension, Galsworthy makes sure that the cracking of nuts be heard while the family sits in silence.

There is still another instance that reminds us of Ibsen. When we come to the end of Act I, Scene I, we hear the sound of the door being closed by Jones who leaves the house with the stolen box and purse. The closing of the door which suggests the end of Jones's good life brings into our memory the famous ending of Ibsen's A Doll's House: when Nora leaves her husband's house, we also hear the sound of a door shutting from below, implying that her married life has finally come to an end.

To return to the inception of The Silver Box, in the first place we owe it to Edward Garnett who suggested to Galsworthy in 1905 that he should write a play for the Court Theatre, a small London theatre which was under the management of Granville Barker and Vedronne who had begun to produce a series of plays there which were in effect a protest against the current state of English drama the characteristic of which was its isolation from society and contemporary life. The word 'theatrical' was taken into common use to denote whatever was unreal and unlife-like. Examples of such are the plays of romantic and Victorian poets such as Shelley, Byron, Browning, and Tennyson, translations of French and German romantic plays, dramatized versions of popular novels by Scott and Dickens, and Shakespeare's productions frequently in remodelled or amended versions. The themes of those plays as a whole did not go beyond what we now call sensational melodrama or farce. The plays often had to end happily in order to please middle-class people who formed the majority of the audience.

Perhaps Galsworthy had already had in his mind, before being urged by Garnett in 1905, a desire to see a change in English drama; he might, for instance, have seen the possibilities in Pinero's The Second Mrs. Tanqueray (1893), a play which deals with more serious social and personal problems. In The Island Pharisees which was published in 1904, he had already made known how the English theatre irritated him with its portrayal of the conventional idea of love and marriage. Shelton, the central character in the novel, is taken to the theatre to see a play which he recognises as "one of those masterpieces of the modern drama whose characters were drawn on the principle that men were made for morals rather than morals made by men".¹ The play is about a wife who loathes her husband but has to stay with him for the good opinion of society. The irony of the play is surely as much Galsworthy's own as his creation's. However, Shelton's companion at the theatre, Halidome, cannot understand his criticism of the play. "That ending makes me sick,"² says Shelton. Halidome is astonished -- he is the conventional English theatre goer of the time. "What other end is possible?" he asks. "You don't want a play to leave you with a bad taste in your mouth." "But that's exactly what this does"³ replies Shelton.

When Galsworthy wrote The Silver Box he was determined to write a play which did not "leave a bad taste in the mouth" -- at least not in the mouths of those who were open minded enough to face the truth and to see truth pursued to its logical end. It was taken for granted of course that this might offend the Halidomes who remained in the audience and who preferred the safe blinkered vision of the usual type of play.

However, Galsworthy's revolutionary ideas about the English theatre might have come to nothing -- for he had already devoted himself to writing novels -- if Garnett and Barker had not helped him to discover his dramatic talent, a talent which has been admitted by all to equal his skill in writing novels.

1. Galsworthy : The Island Pharisees (edition of 1932), p. 48

2. Ibid, p. 52

3. Ibid, p. 52

The Cigarette Box, Galsworthy's first name for the play, The Silver Box, was written in only six weeks and in an even shorter period of time was accepted by the Granville Barker and Vedrenne management. Here is the manner of its acceptance: "Arriving on Saturday, it was read by Granville Barker and Bernard Shaw on the Sunday, and accepted by Barker, with Shaw's approval, on the Monday,"¹ and the rehearsal was also prepared in the same month.

After the rehearsal, Galsworthy found that the three male principal characters namely Mr. Barthwick, his son, and Jones were quite satisfactory. The keynotes of their roles as defined by Galsworthy himself are as follows: that "of Barthwick is want of courage. He thinks himself full of principle and invariably compromises in the face of facts. The keynote of Jack is inherent want of principle derived from Barthwick, and courage by fits and starts derived from Mrs. Barthwick. The keynote of Jones is smouldering revolt."²

The two female characters, he said, were still 'dicky at present'. What he wanted Mrs. Barthwick to be was a "hard - mouthed woman uncompromising" and with courage. ".....The keynote of Mrs. Barthwick is want of imagination. Her imagination is only once aroused; and that by a personal touch, viz. by the child's crying at the end of Act II. Mrs. Barthwick is not more than fifty and well preserved."³

As for Mrs. Jones, her chief characteristic is "passivity, and she must not be played pathetically, only be pathetic from force of circumstances."⁴ Galsworthy himself was not so sure about the rehearsal performance of Mrs. Jones; he thought it was 'touch and go.' But many thought, after seeing the performance at the Court Theatre, that the part was beautifully acted. W.H. Hudson wrote, "... We both thought that the part of the charwoman was the queen of the piece....."⁵ Lucas also had a favourable comment on the charwoman, "At first I wondered if the charwoman ought not to have been given more individuality, but I see now that she was right."⁶

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1. Marrot, p. 191
 2. Ibid, pp. 191 - 192
 3. Ibid, pp. 190 - 191
 4. Ibid, p. 192
 5. Ibid, pp. 197 - 198
 6. Ibid, p. 198

On the whole, the play was considered a great success, 'a work of extraordinary interest and quiet power.' Galsworthy was called 'The Coming Man' in The Lady of Fashion. His play was translated into German, Russian, and other languages. According to him, the play was much more suitable to continental taste than to English taste, "for here we are rotted by a stage convention purely false and artificial." ¹

In writing his first play, Galsworthy was accused of using faulty technique and his play was said to be so episodic as scarcely to be a play : he divided his first act into three scenes by dropping the curtain to indicate the flight of time. "Modern technique has made it a kind of rule that each act shall in time and place be an undivided whole," ² said The Sketch.

Some critics, on the other hand, praised Galsworthy's technique in the play. Among them, The Sketch and The Academy were the most positive. "The Silver Box", said The Academy, "is obviously built up by the most delicate strokes and is the product of the most careful and meticulous workmanship. But when its author wrote it he was thinking of life, not of the theatre, he never allowed himself to sacrifice truth to mere stage effect or to shirk the situation as it would happen in life for the situation that the old - fashioned playwright had found to be effective on the stage. Hence the extraordinary success of his play." ³

Of nearly sixty Press notices, as collected by Mr. Marrot, only a handful were unfavourable. Nine out of ten critics, however, found more to praise than to blame. "In sum (said The Times) we have nothing - or nothing that we choose to say - but praise for this play. Our stage realists (of the real psychology, not the real pump sort) are so rare, and so valuable, in the theatre, that we would not say a word to discourage a recruit to their little band so promising as Mr. John Galsworthy." ⁴

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1. Ibid, p. 197
 2. Ibid, p. 199
 3. Ibid, p. 202
 4. Ibid, p. 199

Joy

Galsworthy's second play Joy, which was performed at the Savoy Theatre one year after The Silver Box was received in a very different manner from the earlier play. It was almost universally pronounced a great disappointment, its chief fault obviously being that the main plot of the story is lost in the excessive dialogue and in action which has nothing to do with the development of the main theme. A.B. Walkley wrote, "All these people loaf or skip (according to their ages) about the lawn, and talk about nothing in particular, until you wonder what is to be the subject of the play. And suddenly, while you are looking another way, that subject emerges,"¹ The Morning Post continues to grumble in the same vein: "What one wants are scenes between the mother and the daughter, the mother and the lover. There are a few such scenes, but they are short, and only doled out late in the play. These scenes, which the dramatist would delight in, Mr. Galsworthy postpones as much as he can. One comes to them tired."²

Tired the critic may have been, and he omits to give the scenes in question the full praise they deserve, for they have in fact great dramatic power and a touch of delicacy. Galsworthy shows great skill and sensitivity in presenting the domestic problems between the mother and the daughter, and the mother and the lover, i.e. Joy, Mrs.Gwyn and Lever. His keen observation of the conflict between them brings us closer to his characters and makes us feel for them as if they were our own relatives. We see Joy as a passionate young girl whose mother means everything to her. Apart from her own father, any other men who share her mother's affection are definitely considered her bitterest enemies. However, Mrs.Gwyn is not content to have only Joy; while Joy is trying desperately to win her back from Lever, she herself, on the other hand, is occupied by doubt as to whether her lover still loves her or has already grown tired of her. As for Lever, it is not only the barrier of marriage that comes in between in his relationship with Mrs.Gwyn, but Joy's attitude towards him also increases the difficulties. He tries in vain to make friends with Joy. He even once asks her to hit him in order to calm her down. But Joy makes it clear to him that she has nothing,

1. Marrot, p. 209

2. Ibid, p. 210

not even a blow, to give him, but only her deep hatred and resentment towards him.

The end of the play once again fails to satisfy a great many readers some of whom would rather have the mother giving in to Joy or if that is impossible, then, Joy conceding to the mother's marriage. But Galsworthy does not think that such an end would be suitable. Here is his explanation: "My feeling was and is this: a fourth Act showing Molly yielding to Joy or Joy yielding to Molly would be no end. The deep true ending of that situation comes once and for all at the moment that the mother and child find they are no longer first with one another. It would be no use patching it, for the patch would not close the wound, and a few months or years would see the child go to her predestined lover as the mother went before her" ¹

Among the few people who praise Joy, are Conrad and Masfield, both of whom consider that Joy is in a way finer than even The Silver Box. The former writes, "The delicacy of observation is greater than in The Silver Box, or perhaps the sentiments observed are of a more delicate kind" ²

He discovers that the play is full of well - chosen expressions from the beginning to the end. Besides, the character of Joy also attracts him: "..... One wonders at the depth of passion in that tree - climbing young lady --till one realizes the insight of presentation - the illuminating power of youthful egoism and the strength of youthful resentment. And she is a delightful goose and all this is very good, very good." ³ Joy in fact is the forerunner of a whole train of child - parts created by Galsworthy with an appealing insight into the psychology of the young.

1. Ibid, p. 213

2. Ibid, p. 211

3. Ibid, p. 212

Strife

Though Conrad was wrong in predicting that ~~this play~~ ^{Joy} would appeal to the public, he was right when he made a similar prophecy about Strife, Galsworthy's third play. In his next letter to Galsworthy, Conrad said : "..... the murmurs against Joy shall be drowned in such a shout around Strife as this country has not heard for a hundred years or more." ¹

His prophecy turned out to be true. The first performance of Strife at The Duke of York's Theatre on March 9th, 1909 was a tremendous success. Any disappointment in Joy was forgotten in the loud applause for Strife, which has been considered by many his best play. The play had, in fact, been written and finished six months before Joy was produced in 1907, but it was not until 1909 that it was performed before the public.

The play roused so much interest that it was also given an evening run at the Haymarket and Adelphi theatres. " Not often", says The Globe, "have we witnessed more genuine enthusiasm in a theatre than was accorded to Mr.Galsworthy's Strife."

"It is very difficult to write praise; very easy to find fault. As I have nothing but praise for Mr. Galsworthy's new play Strife , I find it difficult to say calmly what I think of it. Perhaps the best thing I can say is that I feel proud to think that it was written by an Englishman, and acted by English men and women." ²

Punch and The Nation also have notices in the same tone. The Times adds another remark, "If we are not mistaken, when an artist of Mr. Galsworthy's high endeavour, mental equipment, and technical skill writes a play like Strife, he has done much more than write a play; he has rendered a public service." ³

There are in fact some unfavourable notices, but they are very few in comparison with the others. One such notice appeared in The Clarion and condemned the play because it was not frank Socialist propaganda.

1. Ibid, p. 212

2. Ibid, p. 242

3. Ibid, p. 242

In fact, Galsworthy does not mean to take sides with either capital or labour. The strike itself is not his main theme. This is his explanation: "It has always been the fashion to suppose that it is a play on the subject of capital and labour. But the strike, which forms the staple material of the play, was only chosen by me as a convenient vehicle to carry the play's real theme, which is that of the Greek $\nu\beta\pi\iota\varsigma$, or violence; Strife is, indeed, a play on extremism or fanaticism."¹

The characters who go to extremes are Anthony and Roberts; Anthony is chairman of the Board which controls the Trenartha Tin Plate Works and is therefore the figurehead of capitalism in the play, while Roberts is the leader of the workers who are on strike for better wages and better conditions. These two men are, in Galsworthy's eyes, "the only characters in the play who can be called heroic, and who move us to admiration; they are also by reason of their extremism the villains of the piece."²

Anthony as we see him in the play is a man of strong will and principle. Nobody has ever succeeded in persuading him to act against his principles. He is fearless, and unyielding and remains the brave old unbeaten bulldog to the bitter end. When he finally finds out that no one will support him, he calmly resigns his position on the Board, his head unbowed, his spirit still strong enough to withstand the severest blow. In making Anthony do this, Galsworthy creates a character who makes a greater impression on us than his first notion of the part in which Anthony actually had a physical break-down when he resigned.

The speech below will give us a clearer conception of Anthony: "I have had to do with 'men' for fifteen years; I've always stood up to them; I have never been beaten yet. Fear of the men ! Fear of the shareholders ! Fear of our own shadows ! Before I am like that, I hope to die. Masters are masters, men are men ! Yield one demand, and they will make it six Be under no misapprehension -- run this time, and you will never make a stand again ! You will have to fly like curs before the whips of your own men."³

1. Ibid, p. 637

2. Ibid, p. 638

3. Galsworthy : The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), pp. 150, 151, 152

After a production of Strife at Nottingham, Galsworthy was caught by a capitalist who enthusiastically said, "By Jove, Sir, I did enjoy that speech you gave old Anthony; that's the stuff to give them."¹

Roberts' part is no less popular than that of Anthony. Words flow from him like a flood of angry water. "It got the blighters plumb centre ! "² said a Labour 'fan' to Galsworthy after a production of Strife at Oxford. The following is one of Roberts' vigorous speeches at a telling moment of the play: "Tell me, for all their talk is there one of them that will consent to another penny on the Income Tax to help the poor ? That's Capital ! A white - faced, stony - hearted monster ! If we have not the hearts of men to stand against it breast to breast, and eye to eye, and force it backward till it cry for mercy, it will go on sucking life; and we shall stay for ever what we are [in almost a whisper] less than the very dogs."³ He makes this speech at a meeting attended by a great number of strikers who are still uncertain whether to make a further move for or against him. It is not only the speech that grips the audience: Galsworthy's skill in presenting the full - stage assembly of strikers is also a masterpiece of stagecraft.

It was said by some critics that Roberts' powerful speech created a certain impact on the public mind, and gave people a hint as to how the industrial and economical condition in England would change. In other words, it was clear to Galsworthy as to others that the situation of the worker could not remain static - that sooner or later, as the country's economical position worsened, the feeling beneath the surface was bound to erupt. When it did erupt in 1926 in the form of the General Strike, some people saw in this the thing that Galsworthy seemed to predict in Strife.

But this "prediction" was denied by Galsworthy, as stated before. The problem between the workers and the employers is not what Galsworthy primarily wants us to see in Strife. The purpose underlying Strife is to present "human nature in the thick of a fight, the 'heroism' of diehardism, and the nemesis that dogs it."⁴ In other words, it is an

1. Marrot, p. 638

2. Ibid, p. 638

3. Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), pp. 136, 137

4. Ibid, p. 638

"illustration of the predestined doom of violence, rather the notion of the old Greeks." ¹

The doom of the two heroes, in my opinion, is due to their own extremism rather than to fate or anything else. The death of Roberts' wife and the fact that both Roberts and Anthony are overthrown by their colleagues are the direct result of their 'strong will minus self-control ~~control~~ and balance'. In fact, Enid, Anthony's daughter, has already made an attempt to help poor Annie whose health is seen getting worse and worse through lack of food and other things which money can buy while she herself, the Anthonys and other people on the Board still live comfortably. But her sympathy and good intentions soon die away after Roberts speaks to her, "If I saw Mr. Anthony going to die, and I could save him by lifting my hand, I would not lift the little finger of it." ² Annie Roberts herself cannot accept help from Enid because of the barrier of class - prejudice and bitterness, and so she makes her own death inevitable — she dies virtually of starvation, and weakness. The fall of Roberts and Anthony also results from their own characters. Their unyielding natures prevent them from compromising and making an end to this strike which is the cause of the labourers' starvation and the loss of over fifty thousand pounds for the capitalists.

As we have seen, Galsworthy thought of these men as victims of predestined doom, like some heroes of Greek tragedy. But in one way these two extremists are quite different from those old Greek heroes who are subject to fate. They work their own way to their final destruction while, let us say, King Agamemnon in Aeschylus meets his ruin unknowingly. He returns from the Trojan War, finds his wife being unfaithful to him, and is himself murdered afterwards. These happenings are not due to his own faults, but to the curse placed upon the family by his grand-uncle who was angry with his grand-father, and it finally falls on the innocent Agamemnon.

The Greek notion, if there is any, in the play is perhaps the sense of 'tragic futility' after the long and cruel battle. Strife ends with Tench, the secretary of the Board, drawing the conclusion: "D' you know, sir --- these terms, they're the very same we drew up

1. Ibid, p. 330

2. Galsworthy: The Plays of Galsworthy (1929), p. 125

together, you, and I, and put to both sides before the fight began ?
All this - all this - and - and what for ? " ¹

After its first productions in London, Strife was produced many times in various places on the continent-in Germany and Austria and also elsewhere in Britain, notably in the industrial north, at Liverpool, and Manchester where the play was most successfully produced by Miss Horniman at the Gaiety Theatre.

The play also inspired other social dramatists after Galsworthy, notably Monkhouse who wrote First Blood in 1924 and was claimed by Nicoll to be influenced by Galsworthy's Strife. He said, "When Monkhouse turns to First Blood he seems to be unconsciously imitating. The atmosphere of Strife dominates the play...." ² According to Nicoll, this play, while it was an interesting study of industrial strife, lacked the freshness that he found in the genuine one, Strife which is, among Galsworthy's plays, still the most frequently performed at the present time.

1. Ibid, p. 156

2. Allardyce Nicoll: British Drama (1949),
p.p. 461 - 462