

CHAPTER IV

OTHER PRE - WAR PLAYS - "JUSTICE" TO "THE FUGITIVE"

Justice

There are altogether eight plays of Galsworthy's which were produced before the first World War. The Silver Box, Joy, and Strife, were followed by Justice (produced in 1910), The Little Dream (1911), The Pigeon (1912), The Eldest Son (1912), and The Fugitive (1913).

Of these plays Strife seems to be the most unforgettable with its vigorous characters and dialogue, and its logical ending as the result of the futile fight. Above all what makes this play very effective is most probably the singleness of its theme which is also the chief characteristic of Galsworthy's other successful plays like The Silver Box and Justice.

In Justice Galsworthy repeated more clearly what he had said in The Silver Box about the defects of English Law. In fact he did not mean to attack the "broad principle" of Law, which was just enough. But he wanted to point out that "with the broad principle there is room for countless shades of differentiation based on real insight into characters and circumstances."¹ But the unbending law is blind to all these. It is like a machine moving on and on crushing all those who happened to fall underneath. And to Galsworthy, it was like seeing "how the herd goes to death its weak members".² In this play, the weak members are represented by Falder, a young clerk who yields to the momentary temptations of embezzlement because of his overwhelming desire to help the woman he loves. He is too weak to resist the temptation and later to confess openly, yet he is treated as though his heart were made of iron in sending him to stay in prison for three years with all the hardened criminals. The following speech of Frome's, Falder's advocate, is actually the voice of Galsworthy himself: "Gentlemen, men like the prisoner are destroyed daily under our law for want of that human insight which sees them as they are, patients, and not criminals. If the prisoner be found guilty, and treated as though he were a criminal type, he will

1. Marrot, p. 268

2. Ibid, p. 266

as all experience shows, in all probability become one".¹

Unlike his method in earlier plays, Galsworthy gives us some solution to the problem he raised. This is Falder's opinion when he is finally out of the prison: "There were all sorts there. And what I mean, sir, is, that if we'd been treated differently the first time, and put under somebody that could look after us a bit, and not put in prison, not a quarter of us would ever have got there."²

Galsworthy saw that English prisons were in a very bad state. Before writing Justice he had visited several prisons and had studied the prison system widely. He had also had a chance to interview some prisoners and some warders as well. Therefore it is no wonder that his prison-cell scene became one of the culminating moments of the play.

In this scene we can see for ourselves that the prisoners not only suffer from physical discomfort, but their mental condition is also worsened by the prison's surroundings and by the system as a whole. They find no way to occupy their minds and the fact that they have nothing to do drives them nearly to madness, especially those who have received solitary confinement. One prisoner has spent his whole time in a separate cell making a saw to help him make an escape. He knows full well that he will be re-arrested as soon as he gets out and will consequently get more punishment, but he keeps on doing this just to occupy his time and to prevent him from going mad. H.G.Wells was one among many who appreciated the prison-scenes: this is what he told Galsworthy in his letter: ".... I remember too blundering years ago upon the condemned cells at Exeter one bright summer afternoon - and I've felt all your play so finally ~~is~~ and essentially conveys."³

In spite of all these excellent descriptions of the prison-scenes in Act III, Galsworthy made it clear that these scenes were put in the play only as a sub-plot in order to strengthen his main theme that 'Justice is a blind Goddess'. But when this play was produced, this sub-plot was generally admitted as a real and dominant theme; this somewhat irritated Galsworthy as we can see from his own expression, "Since to make that presentment was my main purpose, it naturally gives me no

1. Galsworthy: The Collected Plays of Galsworthy (1929) p. 244

2. Ibid, p. 269

3. Marrot, p. 260

particular pleasure to find the public riding off on the minor point of prison reform,"¹

In fact, Galsworthy's audience acknowledged his real purpose but they did not take it seriously because they found it easier to criticise, and even reform the prison system, rather than to change the principle of the law in order that people like Falder might not be put in jail after committing a crime. Conventional feeling may be summed up in the judge's speech as follows: "The Law, is what it is - a majestic edifice, sheltering all of us, each stone of which rests on another. I am concerned only with its administration."²

However, as we have seen earlier in this thesis, the play had a great deal of influence on the new prison reforms both in England and America; this is what Ernest Reynolds, a famous English literary figure, thought, "Perhaps no other play in the history of our theatre could point to such clear results or could so plainly vindicate the cause of the drama of ideas."³

Apart from its merit in getting a practical result, the play is quite sensational in itself, especially the cell-scene and the last part of the final act when Falder ends his life tragically for fear of being put in prison for the second time.

It is quite clear to us where Galsworthy's sympathy as well as his hatred lie. He is so overwhelmed with pity for Falder and with a strong dislike for 'Justice' that he frequently breaks into the play himself using his characters as a bridge to convey his opinion to the audience. It may even be said that he seems to be more interested in expressing his own feelings than in the development of his characters. This might be a reason why his characters do not come out as vividly as they should. Falder, for instance, has very little life of his own. He appears as a victim of the law and one can see plainly how he has been destroyed by it, but at the same time he fails to draw our sympathy in a degree equal to that of Galsworthy himself. Falder is just an ordinary, weak, and fearful man who not only committed the serious crime of altering

1. Ibid, p. 265

2. Galsworthy : The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929)
p. 248

3. Ernest Reynolds : Modern English Drama (1949)

a cheque to his own advantage, but also tried to throw his own fault on an innocent man. In fact he has nothing special in his character to make us feel for or against him as much as we do for Galsworthy's other chief characters such as Roberts and Anthony in Strife at the moment of their disaster.

So much for the weak points of Justice which, in spite of them, still remained a great play. They did not prevent it being well received at its first production in February, 1910, at the Duke of York's Theatre, London; it was also simultaneously produced at the Glasgow Repertory Theatre. It was recorded that in London the part of Falder was brilliantly created by Mr. Dennis Badie. The audience liked Justice so much that at the end of the play on the first night they refused to leave the theatre even when the lights were put out and the theatre was all dark because they wanted to see Galsworthy and to applaud him.



The Little Dream

The four plays which followed Justice, namely The Little Dream (1911), The Pigeon (1912), The Eldest Son (1912), and The Fugitive (1913), were not as popular as their immediate predecessor. For some reason or other they do not seem to be up to Galsworthy's standard. Among these, however, The Little Dream is the most enjoyable in spite of its predominantly light atmosphere which always weakens Galsworthy's plays. This is a delightful short play about a restless and romantic mountain-girl who is constantly enchanted by the mystery of the unknown. What Galsworthy said about this play is very much to the point both in considering the play itself as well as for the rest of his works:

"My view of the universe is that of a perpetual conflict between opposing principles, dark and light, life and death, ebb and flow.....
... Between these conflicting principles in nature there is a mysterious and by us not to be appreciated point of reconciliation.

"In moral and spiritual spheres there is just this same perpetual state of conflict through which the human mind and spirit travels towards the mysterious Harmony, which stills and reconciles this conflict.

The little soul in my play is passing through this world of conflict (typified by Lamond and Folsman as Town and Country: Civilization and wild nature: adventure and peace) on her way to the unknowable, mysterious and everlasting reconciliation or Harmony." ¹

This play is different from the rest because it is full of symbols. Although Galsworthy is considered to be far from a symbolist, he is able to create picturesque figures, nearly all of which are meant to represent something else. For example, the two men who are in love with the heroine of this play are, as stated by Galsworthy, meant to represent "Town and country: Civilization and Wild nature: adventure and peace." This play is on the whole very pleasant, and the audience have always been attracted to the mountain-girl, Seelchen, who is the leading female character of this play.

The Pigeon

As for the rest of these pre-war plays, there is not much to be said about them and they made no great mark on the theatre - going public. In The Pigeon we are kept in doubt after finishing the play as to what Galsworthy really aims at in it. Although in the play he states his belief that "all reform un-inspired by sympathy and understanding is dead wood in our tree", ² he does not definitely show us the fruitful result of treatment of the poor or the hopeless inspired by sympathy and understanding. The Pigeon is in fact chiefly interesting for reasons other than the intrinsically dramatic. A character in this play, Louis Ferrand, a young wanderer, had in fact some connection with Galsworthy's own life, and, it seems probable, considerable impact on

1. Marrot, p.p. 330 - 331

2. Ibid, p. 330

Galsworthy's beliefs and thence on the themes of his drama. Ferrand then will be dealt with in greater detail below.¹

The Eldest Son

There is nothing particular either to be said for The Eldest Son. The theme of this play is a common one in domestic drama, and there was in fact one play simultaneously produced with The Eldest Son (1912) that had almost the same story: this play's title was The Hindle Wakes, and its author, Stanley Houghton, and Galsworthy had some correspondence over this coincidence: "I am afraid that when my play The Eldest Son is at last produced, there will be a certain amount of comment on the similarity (not of plot and character but) of situation and the philosophy underlying it. If there is, I shall have to tell the Press that The Eldest Son was conceived in 1906, written in February and March 1909, and delivered complete to Charles Frohman for his repertory scheme in June of that year....."²

The theme of these two plays is that of the rich young man who falls in love with a working girl; in The Hindle Wakes she is the daughter of an employee; in Galsworthy's play she is the maid. The authors of both plays might have been inspired by Robertson's famous play, Caste, in which we see the author's attempt to ventilate the idea of marriage between people of different classes. Significantly enough, the rich young people in The Eldest Son are engaged in an amateur production of Caste.

As for the characters in this play, again they do not seem to have enough life of their own. I agree with John Masefield's remarks about certain of them: "Freda [the maid] is, I feel,, too much a bag of nerves. I want more of her personality."³ And though Bill (the son of the house), Studdenham (Freda's father), and Dot, Bill's sister who seems to have less class prejudice than other members of the

1. See below, p. 96

2. Marrot, p. 354

3. Ibid, p. 356

Cheshire Family, are fine, "... the others do not quite walk out of the scene and say 'We're alive. We don't want this setting, really. We're human beings, not limited to this play.'" ¹

The Fugitive

Now we come to the last play of Galsworthy before the first World War began. This play, The Fugitive was formerly called The Man of The World. It started as a satiric comedy but in the end it came out as a tragedy. "The play is the tragedy of 'lady hood'," explained Galsworthy, "Of women too fine to sink really low, and not fine enough to make good in spite of everything." ²

Clara, the central character in this play, is the kind of woman who always drew Galsworthy's sympathy. She has almost the same qualities as Irene's in The Man of Property: so weak, fragile, and helpless; each of them is the wretched prey of other people and of the laws or conventions of English society. The idea that women were being treated unjustly had in fact started before Galsworthy's time and spread into the drama. Ibsen was generally admitted as the first playwright who deliberately tried to claim recognition for the rights of women to lead their own lives, as for instance he did in A Doll's House which appeared in 1879.

In writing The Fugitive Galsworthy had this motto in mind: "No duty survives where love does not." ³ This may have resulted from his own experience in the past when he was still a young bachelor tormented by his love of a married woman who also reciprocated his love and who later on decided to leave her husband for him and to flout conventional morality. This fact alone together with Galsworthy's knowledge and observation of the sufferings of women in general made him the bitterest opposer of the idea of marriage without love. This is what he said in his letter to St. John Ervine, "If there is a person in the world who hates such stage juggling with the aversion between husband

1. Ibid, p. 356

2. Ibid, p. 372

3. Ibid, p. 382

and wife for the sake of a 'moral' or 'happy' ending more than myself I have yet to find him or her".¹

It may seem to us that Galsworthy thought too much of a woman's feelings and too little of her duties when he made Clare desert her husband to live on her own. But Galsworthy brought up various reasons to justify his theme, above all "the idealism in Clare of her body and spirit belonging to each other, and of not taking when she is not giving".² And this is why Clare cannot remain in her husband's house donying herself to him. Her first intention is only to get away from him and we can see that she does not go to live with Malise, her lover, until other circumstances make it impossible for her to live alone.

This play roused much adverse criticism in England and also in France. After reading this play Gerald du Maurier, a famous producer and play-promoter, stormed out most violently: "It depressed me, angered me, and I have come to the conclusion that I do not understand it. If it is merely the tragedy of a "fey" woman; or else a suggestion that an urgent reform is needed in the marriage contract, and that no woman should be bound to a man when she discovers that she no longer loves him. Yes - that is it. But it is not clear, and the man she grows to adore - Malise - is to me unbearable, a carper, a snoerer, and a bore....." ³

In his reply Galsworthy did not say whether he seriously hoped to get the law reformed or not, although he made it clear in this play that Clare was eventually ruined by the marriage law which allowed her former husband to claim damages from Malise, and which was the cause of her departure from Malise in order to prevent his complete financial ruin. Instead Galsworthy showed that he was more interested in analyzing a certain female character, a pathetic one, who had only enough pluck to cut adrift from her incompatible husband (and who, in so doing, showed she was the sort of person Galsworthy admired), but who had no more courage left to carry her through all the difficulties of the world. Galsworthy also said that he did not want du Maurier to like Malise as a person; he actually thought that Malise would rouse dislike. Strangely

1. Ibid, p. 781

2. Ibid, p. 364

3. Ibid, p. 371

enough, Clare, his heroine falls in love with this man and later comes to live with him as his mistress. The whole play, therefore, is rather complicated. We are unable to follow Galsworthy all the way through since he himself set up too many debatable points and confusing signs along his way; we constantly lose his track and our relish for his play naturally lessens.

However when this play was first produced at the Royal Court theatre in September 1913, its production and reception were recorded by Galsworthy as "Not bad, and well received". And though most of the critics found some defect or other in it, the general tone was respectful.

It can be seen then that while Galsworthy was praised for the seriousness of his purpose and for his technical skill in laying out dramatic scenes, he was likely to sink beneath his level whenever he made a special attempt to deal with too many themes in one play as he did in Joy and The Fugitive, or when he tried to change the usual serious and rather gloomy atmosphere in his plays into a lighter and wittier one as in The Little Dream, Joy and later on in A Bit O' Love. Moreover, another defect so far in his not very successful plays such as The Eldest Son is in his characterisation. Often the people in his plays seem to be "the embodiment of a state of mind or a state of body" rather than real human beings of flesh and blood. "He could not forget the fact that a man was poor or rich or stupid....or a Jew...." said Frank Swinnerton in The Georgian Literary Scene; i.e. they do not become rounded characters we only see too dazzling a glimpse of one side of them. In other words, Galsworthy's own obsession with the "types" of people he presented, and his own dramatic method, imposed a severe limitation on his characters, a limitation which, when the theme itself was not sufficiently striking, made them fail to attract the audience and, in all too many cases to be forgotten in a very short time. Thus, of the plays so far discussed, it is only a few which can still be said to live with a genuine strength of their own. Of these, we might name The Silver Box, which has the freshness of a first play and a singular vitality in it; Strife, for the power of the conflict it portrays and the hard indomitability of its main protagonists, and - possibly - Justice, for the strength of the plea it makes for the weak victim of the system, Falder.