

CHAPTER VIII

LAST PLAYS

Escape

Between the years 1920 and 1922, Galsworthy seemed to be at the peak of his dramatic career with the productions of The Skin Game and Loyalties. After that he seemed to decline; nevertheless, some later plays of his still appealed to the public. The most remarkable of them is Escape which was first produced at the Ambassadors Theatre, London, in 1926. Its tremendous commercial success was recorded as equal to that of The Skin Game and Loyalties.

In Escape we see another development of Galsworthy's technique, which is, to a certain extent, similar to the technique often used in the cinema, that of presenting various aspects of life in the form of episodes with a strong and direct narrative element. With this new experiment Galsworthy at last seemed to have made another break - through, and once more the public warmed to him.

The characters in this play were very carefully treated by Galsworthy because the main method used is to make each of them react to Matt Denant, an escaped convict and the central character, "according to the individual circumstances of his or her life."¹ Here is Galsworthy's explanation of his characters:

"The retired Judge, for instance, has had too much criminal's blood to be bloodthirsty. The shingled lady's brother knew Matt at school. The Plus Four man and his wife take diametrically opposite lines (though of the same class) because of divergent temperaments. The same applies to the two ladies in the Cottage of Tranquillity. Among the trippers, too, two take a much less hard view than the other two. The farmer and labourers just have the attitude of men who live, so to speak, with the escaped convict dangers hanging over them all the time. Finally, the parson is just a good fellow, and has been at the war like Matt."²

In various episodes all these characters meet and show their reactions to Matt. In each scene the atmosphere of the play varies and is thus never allowed to become monotonous. The exploitation of this episodic technique, together with Galsworthy's great dramatic skill in keeping the audience in a state of suspense all through as to whether the

1. Marrot, p. 800

2. Ibid, p. 800

convict will be captured or not, combine to produce a novel and exciting play, -- and account for its popularity.

This convict, Matt Denant, is in fact one of Galsworthy's finest creations. He is not a hardened criminal but a noble and gentle person who has been imprisoned because he accidentally caused a policeman's death in his attempt to save a woman from being arrested. Here we come to the main theme of this play, a theme which we have already seen in *Justice* :- that of a man being unjustly condemned by the blind goddess of justice, a victim of the law. Being a clever and brave man, Matt finds prison life intolerable, and at last manages to escape from it. But still he is unable 'to escape from his best self' that forces him to give in to the police in the end in order to save a parson from committing the sin of lying to save him from re - arrest.

The dialogue of the play is very gripping and exciting in itself. The conversation between the old Judge and Matt in Part II Episode IV keeps the reader in suspense as well as the escaped convict himself by the subtle ambiguity of the old man's remarks. Has he recognised Matt or not ? Line after line makes one hold one's breath, until at the end of their long and friendly conversation the judge suddenly calls the convict by his name and tells him that he has known all along who he is. But being a kind and sympathetic man, he lets Matt go free instead of giving him away to his pursuers.

This play was not only able to capture the public but the critics too; they were very enthusiastic about it. J.M. Barrie wrote: "All I can say is that I could not lay the play down until I had finished it. I once joined in the long pursuit of a thief in Oxford Street, but it was nothing like as vivid as this, and I feel as if I had been on the heels of Matt the whole time (propelling him forward as my St. Bernard used to do when the rabbits he was pursuing wouldn't go fast enough). Of course the last scene is the best of all. I wondered what it would be, and indeed it is of your very choicest, and belongs to you as much as ¹ your right arm. In the meantime I'm prouder of you than ever."

1. Ibid, p. 574

Exiled

Galsworthy had declared his intention of letting Escape be his last play, but after the tremendous success of its production in 1926, he was asked to go on writing. The next two plays after Escape are his last completed ones and are not of the same quality as their immediate predecessor. The first of them, Exiled, deals with people who are "exiled" from English society because of a change in their circumstances. There are various kinds of poor people in this play: first there is the man who was once rich, Sir Charles Denbury, Baronet, who has to leave for Africa when he loses his fortune; secondly, the tramp, who feels himself and others like him to be badly - treated by a newly rich man, Sir John Mazer, who has built himself up until he has become one of the local authorities; thirdly, there are the miners who have no work to do because Sir John Mazer closed the mine when he saw that he would gain nothing from it. There was in fact, a great number of unemployed workers in England at that time, and Galsworthy felt that it was his duty to draw the government's attention to them. This time the innkeeper speaks for him: "There's English blood and bone. If the old country'd put her back into it, the whole trouble would mop up like one of these ground mists. That's my opinion." ¹

The plot of this play seems to bear a certain similarity to the plays that come immediately before and after it, i.e. Escape and The Roof, in which all of the different circumstances are linked to one figure or one event, the escaped convict in Escape, and the fire in The Roof. In Exiled, the various kinds of people mentioned earlier are at first linked by Sir Charles Denbury's race-horse: it is backed by its owner and the miners, but is later maliciously wounded by the tramp, and is consequently unable to run in the race which is won by Sir John's horse. The attack on Sir Denbury's horse is very shocking news to those who have backed it and to lovers of animals such as Mr. East, who cannot bear to see any dumb animal being cruelly treated. But to Sir John Mazer, this is a piece of good news. Hearing this from his secretary he exclaims: "By Gosh ! That's luck ! I was afraid of that mare, Miss Card. Evolution'll about win now." ²

1. Galsworthy: Collected Plays of Galsworthy (1929), p. 1092

2. Ibid, p. 1060

This incident over the horse leads to the main theme of this play — the corrupt condition of England where the rich think only of money while a great number of poor and unemployed people wander about aimlessly seeking comfort by drinking whenever they have money. When we come to the end of the play we see how the miners spend the money that Sir Mazer has given them in order to buy their good will. Instead of making good use of it or giving it to their families which are in painful need of it, they choose to spend it on drinking. It is very depressing to see those of "English blood and bone" ¹ feasting themselves sumptuously ~~is~~ and merrily, completely forgetting their families and their future. Yet some people are still too sentimental to face the fact that their 'good old England' ² is declining; the play ends with the ironical remark of Sir Charles Denbury that even if England were in the grave her soul would go marching on because her people will never believe that she is dying.

The play was coldly received when it was first produced at Wyndham's Theatre in 1929. The reason for its cold reception might come from the fact that there is very little action in the play. The incident over the horse, the way it has represented people's hopes and then disappointed them, through which it has become a symbol of the class-war, is in fact the only real action in the play, and seems at best too slight a basis on which to build so much. Besides, the direct message of this play, that England is sinking lower, is not in itself very attractive especially to the English people themselves, and must also have contributed to the play's unpopularity.

However there are some interesting parts in this play, notably the scene where Sir John Mazer gives an interview to the journalist. And the dialogue is also very well written and deserves special mention. It varies according to the sorts and characteristics of the speakers. The tramp, the miners, Sir Mazer's daughter, the journalist ... etc, they all have their different ways of speaking; the most distinctive part is probably that of Miss Card, Sir Mazer's secretary, a singularly lady-like person who in her effort to speak correctly distorts the language she is using. The art of writing "true dramatic dialogue" is, to Galsworthy, "an austere art, denying itself all licence, grudging every sentence devoted to the mere machinery of the play, suppressing
all jokes and

1. Ibid, p. 1092

2. Ibid, p. 1092

epigrams severed from character, relying for fun and pathos on the fun and tears of life." ¹ Exiled is a good example of his own art in writing 'true dramatic dialogue'. In fact, the dialogue in Galsworthy's plays as a whole is seldom disappointing; Ludwig Lewisohn, a drama - critic even claimed that his "dialogue is the best dramatic dialogue in the language." ²

The Roof

Galsworthy tried his episodic technique again in The Roof, which is his last completed play. But it was not so successfully used as in Escape. There has been much dispute among the critics about this play and on the whole it might be concluded that it is a failure.

The play is an attempt of Galsworthy's "to reflect the episodic and disconnected aspects." ³ cinematographic aspect of modern life in its It shows a group of people who find their common destiny in a fire.

It looked as if it was going to be another very successful play like Escape but what failed to capture the audience as well as the reader is most probably the lack of dramatic flavour and the defects in the portrayal of the characters in the play. We find most of the characters rather boring, especially the old Boston couple whose business of catching flies in their bedroom in scene IV is rather annoying although Galsworthy apparently intended it to add light relief in the growing tension of the play.

The characters of the two girls, Diana and Dryn, the Lennox's daughters of fourteen and twelve years of age, are worth some discussion. In the beginning, they appear to be very naughty and amusing with their pillow - fights and their childish talk. But then they abruptly stop, and begin a serious discussion on 'life' with their mother. This is very unconvincing and it ruins the atmosphere of this part too. These two characters remind us of Tibby, a little girl in A Bit O' Love : she appears to be an extremely innocent girl at the beginning, but in the end she talks with a high degree of poetic imagination, and pictures

1. Galsworthy: Candelabra (1932), p. 7

2. Eric Bentley : The Modern Theatre (1948), p. 228

3. Marrot, p. 626

a little white feather as a bit of love sent down by the moon.

There are few ideas and little moral teaching behind The Roof. One of Galsworthy's beliefs that finds expression in it is that it is impossible to know what people are really like until they are in a time of danger. For instance, Brice, a hot - tempered and vengeful man, proves himself capable of heroic deeds by risking his life to help Gustave, the French waiter, who is finally saved whereas he himself is killed in the fire. All the characters in this play behave unselfishly and they appear to be very calm during the great fire. Most of them are English and their attitude probably refers to their national characteristics. They are always displaying their nerve and are seldom excited. They can maintain their sense of humour even when they are between life and death. When it is the turn of Froba, a Yugo - Slavian musician who has abundant hair on his head, to climb down the ladder, Baker, an Englishman who has been actively helping other people during the fire, addresses him thus; "Now you, Sir, with the hair. Got your fiddle ? Right ! " ¹

When this play was produced at the Vaudeville Theatre in November 1929, it was attacked by many critics. An example of what were said against Galsworthy at this time was given earlier in this thesis. ² Though there were still some critics who were in favour of The Roof, their voices were not as loud and strong as their opposers', and it was the latter who seemed to influence Galsworthy's continually dwindling public. However there were some people who did not follow the critics completely, and the following is the impression of one of them after seeing the play: ".... Those damned critics nearly kept me away from The Roof, but we went last night in spite of them, and I must write and tell you what enormous pleasure it gave to the whole little party, and how to me especially it brought that continuous feeling of having the back stroked the right way which I can only get from real workmanship, and real observation, and real originality, and real wit....." ³

1. Galsworthy: Collected Plays of John Galsworthy (1929), p. 1147

2. See above p. 27

3. Denis Mackail, quoted in Marrot, p. 624