

CHAPTER II

THE MAN OF PROPERTY

As it has been said, Galsworthy's first written work which appealed to the public was his novel, The Man of Property. It took him right to the top of the literary ladder, and this fact alone together with the relation of its theme and subject matter to that of his plays, warrants a somewhat more detailed discussion of it in this thesis.

The Man of Property appeared in 1906 and was greeted with a chorus of approval. Galsworthy himself knew it to be the best he had written. It had come out of his own experience, for when he described the members of the Forsyte family in The Man of Property, he was thinking of his own relatives. The ten great Forsytes who are sons and daughters of the 'Superior Dossset' are, in fact, his own aunts and uncles. He had altogether nine aunts and uncles, most of whom lived into their eighties. The 'Superior Dossset' was also made to describe Galsworthy's remoter ancestors who were descended from yeomen from Wembury in Devon.

Galsworthy took nearly three years to finish this book. Two-thirds of it were written in just under two years but the last third took only six weeks to finish. The Man of Property is the first volume of The Forsyte Saga, the story of the successive generations of the Forsytes, and gives us the background of this family before its decline.

After The Man of Property which was published in 1906, there came a series of five more books about the Forsytes: In Chancery (1920) To Let (1921), The White Monkey (1924), The Silver Spoon (1926) and Swansong (1928). In fact there are still other smaller Forsyte books and sketches which serve as links between these six great volumes, for instance, Indian Summer of a Forsyte and Two Forsyte Interludes.

Of the six volumes, The Man of Property seems to be the most popular, still the most often read (in an age when Galsworthy is not generally appreciated), and the most discussed. The title of the book refers to Soames Forsyte who, like all the Forsytes, values most things in terms of money. His chief interest in life is how to keep his property and how to increase it.

The story begins when the Forsyte family is "in full plumage".¹ The members of the family and their honourable guests gather at Old Jolyon's house to celebrate the engagement of his grand-daughter, June Forsyte to Philip Bosinney. In fact, this couple never get married because Bosinney afterwards becomes so enchanted by Irene, Soames' wife, that he finally gives his fiancée up. This is sheer madness in the eyes of the Forsytes. How can he give June up when he knows full well that she will one day become an heiress of Old Jolyon's great fortune? How can he suddenly desert her for the sake of Irene who possesses nothing save her beauty? -- a beauty that one of the Forsytes describes as 'dangerous'. Irene's delicate passive face with its shadowy smile and sensitive lips, and her beautiful figure seem to draw all men, young and old to her and make them forget everything else but her. Soames is very proud of his wife, but at the same time, is greatly hurt by Irene's indifference to his affection. She has, in fact, been asking for a separate room, and in spite of Soames' refusal, finally arranges to have what she wants. All this time, her relationship with Bosinney is becoming more and more intimate. Now and then they are seen together in shops, parks and other places. Soames' anger and jealousy are roused by his wife's infidelity as well as by his relatives' and friends' gossiping. He sneaks into Irene's room one night and exercises his rights over her. When Bosinney is informed of this, he is deeply shocked. Under the stress of violent emotion, having "taken the knock,"² -- the phrase used by George Forsyte who sees him in this state and follows him, -- he walks out into the London fog like a man out of his mind. In the heavy traffic and the fog George finally loses Bosinney, and later his body is found: he has been run over and killed.

It is not quite clear whether Bosinney's death is suicide or an accident. When Galsworthy first wrote this story, he made Bosinney clearly commit suicide and was reproved by Edward Garnett for doing so. Garnett said in his letter dated 27th May 1905, ".... I consider Bosinney's suicide an artistic blot of a very grave order, psychologically false, and seriously shaking the illusion of the whole story

1. Galsworthy : The Man of Property (1959), p. 11

2. Ibid, p. 273

for Bosinney possesses Irene, and would be strengthened and strung up by his possession of her to fight extra hard; financial ruin means much less to the Bosinney type of man than you can be aware of." ¹

In his reply, ² Galsworthy pointed out that Bosinney "commits suicide because Irene tells him that Soames has outraged her." He agreed with Garnett that financial trouble would not induce Bosinney to commit suicide, but emphasized "that the whole situation of a bankrupt lover and a woman without money, accustomed to luxury, is not in itself encouraging."

After a lengthy correspondence, Galsworthy at last came to the compromise we now have in the novel as it stands. In his letter to Garnett, he wrote, "..... I think I can bring the reader round to an atmospheric state which will make him accept Bosinney's death whether as accident or suicide -- which, I will leave vague -- without cavilling." ³ He continued in his next letter that Bosinney "was killed while insensible to everything but the thought of revenge" ⁴ and decided that "Bosinney's death will gain in strength and credibility as an accident by judicious use of a suspicion of suicide, which the reader by interior knowledge is enabled to reject." ⁵ He thought that the suspicion of suicide would more or less disturb the Forsytes who were convinced that Soames and James had more than a little to do with Bosinney's death.

Galsworthy in fact never leaves us in any doubt as to where his own sympathies lie and to the effect he wished the ending to have on the reader. In his letter to Edward Garnett, he makes his point quite clear: "To my mind (and I desire to defeat Forsyteism) the only way to do so is to leave the Forsytes masters of the field. The only way to enlist the sympathies of readers on the other side, the only way to cap the purpose of the book, which was to leave property as an empty shell - is to leave the victory to Soames." ⁶

1. Marrot, p. 165

2. Ibid, pp. 168 - 169

3. Ibid, p. 171

4. Galsworthy : The Man of Property (ed.N.L.Clay), 1957, p. 371

5. Marrot, p. 177

6. Ibid, p. 169

Time after time, in the plays that followed this novel, we shall catch echoes of this theme, and see characters who remind us of the Forsytes, Bosinney and Irene -- "Galsworthian types." Even Galsworthy's choice of an ending, his meaning of victory in defeat, becomes the chosen ending of his plays from the very beginning with The Silver Box and Justice, right through to Escape at the close of his dramatic career. Above all, we see in The Man of Property Galsworthy's judgement of the rich and propertied, who have the law on their side but not always justice, and whose righteousness and adherence to a certain set of values seem to set them up in opposition to love and humanity. He criticises the Forsytes for their lack of sympathy and tolerance towards those who are not of the same class and who do not own the same amount of property. Even those who are equal to them in these two respects still suffer slightly from the Forsytes' prejudice, and that is only because they have not been born into the Forsyte family. Aunt Ann's attitude towards the Forsytes and the non-Forsytes may clarify the above : -- ".... There were only some twenty percent of Forsytes; but to Aunt Ann they seemed all Forsytes and certainly there was not much difference -- she saw only her own flesh and blood. -- beyond this only a vague, shadowy mist of facts and persons of no real significance".¹

Most of the Forsytes, as we know, are drawn from Galsworthy's own relatives. When this book was shown to Lily, Galsworthy's elder sister, she was somewhat shocked and consequently asked him not to publish it. Here is Galsworthy's reply, "Do you really think it matters? Apart from yourself, Mab, and Mother (who perhaps had better not read the book), who really knows enough or takes enough interest in us to make it more than a two days' wonder that I should choose such a subject? Who (except the Forsytes, to whom I come presently) knows enough even to connect A. with I. especially as I have changed her hair to gold?"²

He also said in his letter that he was very pleased to know that Lily sympathized with Soames. Though he himself disliked Soames, he always tried to do him justice. Considering that nobody is entirely good or bad, Galsworthy does not throw all the blame on Soames. The picture of Soames as 'a hungry, poor, and pathetic brute' justifies his statement.

1. Galsworthy: The Man of Property (1959), p. 22

2. Marrot, p. 182

However, it annoyed such critics as H.W. Nevinson and D.H. Lawrence who objected to Galsworthy's calm and rather philosophical attitude towards the Forsytes. D.H. Lawrence stormed out. "The Man of Property has the elements of a very great novel, a very great satire. But the author has not the courage to carry it through He faltered and gave in to the Forsytes. It is a thousand pities" ¹

He goes as far as to accuse Galsworthy of sentimentality in helping to make the corruption worse, and therefore Galsworthy is, in his opinion, a failure as an anti - Forsyteist.

Galsworthy himself is well aware of this kind of attack. Though he did not apparently reply direct to Lawrence, there appear in his other letters some explanations which may enable us to understand him better. In a letter to his sister, Lily, he says, "... Then artistically we are not the same in our cravings. To put an example, you would have a contrast so given as to enlist the reader on one side, and against the other. I don't feel like this. I feel more like a sort of chemist, more cold, more dissective, always riding a philosophical idea, and perverting, if you like, my values to fit it. I cannot take the human being so seriously. There are things I like, there are things I love in people, but if I start out to treat them be sure I shall do more than justice to their darker side." ²

And Galsworthy really means what he says. He 'does more than justice to the Forsytes' darker side'. His plan to leave their property as an empty shell is carried out splendidly. "The end is terrific," says Conrad who is very much impressed by "that picture of Soames and Irene on each side of the hearth, and the door slammed on any interference". ³ According to Galsworthy himself, the best scene in the book is also the last scene, and the best passage is the comparison of Irene, when she has returned home after Bosinney's death, to "a shot bird". Knowing nowhere to go she has to turn back to her old cage and to the master whom she hates. "Again he looked at her, huddled like a bird that is shot and dying, whose poor breast you see panting as the air is taken from it, whose poor eyes look at you who have shot it, with a slow, soft, unseeing look, taking farewell of all that is good of the sun and the air, and its mate". ⁴

1. D.H. Lawrence : Selected Essays (1950), p. 221.

2. Marrot, p. 181

3. Ibid, p. 169

4. Galsworthy : The Man of Property (1959), p. 315

Another memorable scene, I think, is the meeting of Old Jolyon and his son and grand-children. Young Jolyon, his only son, has disgraced the family's name by running away from his first wife with a French girl. After fourteen years of separation, Old Jolyon manages to see them again. At their meeting, however, they show very little emotion because the Forsytes do not like to expose their feelings.

The book has become popular both in England and in other countries. It was translated into French with Galsworthy's permission in 1919. When he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1932, Sir James Barrie wrote, "... I am not sure that Soames could not legitimately protest against the Nobel prize going to Mr. Galsworthy instead of to himself..."¹ He said earlier in the same letter that peoples of various nations were able to understand English behaviour most clearly through their familiarity with Galsworthy's Forsytes, "the best known abroad of all families from this island, and perhaps the only one who could travel without passports."²

1. Marrot, p. 642

2. Ibid, p. 642