

CHAPTER V

THE WAR YEARS

The Mob

At the beginning of the first World War in 1914, Galsworthy felt that it was his duty to help his country as much as he could. Besides donating money to various relief funds, he also served his country with his pen by writing articles about the war, in which, as in his plays, he suggested a greater good, and asserted absolute values, that might be lost sight of in the stress of the moment .

In his play, The Mob (formerly called The Patriot), which was produced in 1914 just before the outbreak of the war, he gave a warning of the possible dangers of mass emotion and mass violence. Though each person seemed to be harmless individually, he became different when the spirit of the mob, which in Galsworthy's opinion often led to his over-doing things, overwhelmed him. Patriotism alone was inadequate -- it did not necessarily bring the triumph of good. At the time of his writing this play, the spirit of jingoism was very strong, and it was claimed that Galsworthy was trying to make a plea for the little countries which were cruelly treated by stronger nations. But Galsworthy denied this. He said that his main motive in writing this play was to show that it was the duty of a man to stick to his ideas in the face of popular disapproval so long as his convictions told him he was right. As for little nations, Galsworthy himself confessed that he sometimes felt for them and sometimes not; it depended on the circumstances. However, in The Mob, the opinions to which Stephen More, its "hero", sticks are opinions about jingoism and the waging of a war of retaliation on a small country, and certainly the one theme emerges as clearly as the other. More turns against his fellow - countrymen all of whom are eager to join in a war aimed at crushing this country into pieces because they feel that Britain has been badly insulted by her citizens.

In fact Galsworthy did not himself completely approve of this play as we can see from his letter to Professor Murray: "I never got to like it very much - it lacks I don't quite know what. Still, it's not so bad as some of the Press tries to make out." ¹

1. Marrot, p. 392

The Mob was not very well received by the audience and the press. The reason for this may lie in the plot, which was taken from a real incident at that very time: the English were very dissatisfied with the Irish who were offering armed resistance to a Home Rule Bill which was meant to give limited self-government to the whole of Ireland. The crisis was postponed by the outbreak of the First World War, but jingoism was very much in the air. The audience was incapable of appreciating Galsworthy who obviously took sides with Stephen More, a strong-headed man who stood firmly on his ground against the conventional jingoists who were in fact the audience themselves. He condemned them in the most furious tones: "... You are the thing that pelts the weak; kicks women; howls down free speech. This to-day, and that to-morrow. Brain-- you have none. Spirit-- not the ghost of it! If you're not meanness, there's no such thing. If you're not cowardice, there is no cowardice. Patriotism-- there are two kinds-- that of our soldiers, and this of mine. You have neither.!"¹

When a country is on the verge of war, an audience -- moved, like the people it sees portrayed in front of it, by propaganda and weight of popular opinion -- does not like being harangued. Shaw could attack his own public with irony and wit: Galsworthy had very little irony at his command, and his message was expressed with undiluted passion. Thus, it was quite natural for the public to dislike this play. They were simply unable to find merit in it then since in such circumstances it was almost impossible to be detached: few people in such an audience could realize the real good and evil of an immediate situation. Of course they might come to think about it later on and decide then whether they had been right or wrong in what they had done. And it would not be until then that an individual like Stephen More, in the play or in real life, could come to be seen in a more favourable light. Usually the Stephen Mores of this world do not live to enjoy their triumph; so they are given fame and monuments instead: there is a monument raised to More after his death, on it the following words being written:

Erected
To the Memory
of
Stephen More
"Faithful to his Ideal".

1. Galsworthy: Collected Plays of Galsworthy (1929), p. 414

In other words, the idealism of his words and actions is appreciated in the end, but he has had to suffer for them in his life. More is in fact martyred for them.

Though Galsworthy himself made it clear that The Mob was no favourite of his, I think that it is one of his great plays. He is excellent at describing headstrong people. His skill in such portraiture is first shown in Strife in which he presents the fight between two self-willed characters, then again in The Mob and Old English all of which are tragedies of extremists who never know the word 'yield' and would rather die than change their ways of thinking.

The Chief characters in these plays, especially Stephen More in The Mob, remind us of Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann in An Enemy of the People (1882). This play has a very similar theme to that of The Mob. Both More and Stockmann are considered enemies of the people because they dare to oppose popular opinion, in The Mob, the popular jingoism, and in An Enemy of the People, the idea of keeping the true state of the filthy conduit - pipes a secret in order that a large sum of money might be saved by the town and its citizens. In An Enemy of the People Dr. Stockmann's address to his superiors and other people is in the same tone as that of Stephen More in The Mob: Dr. Stockmann cries:"All the men in this town are old women like you; they all think of nothing but their families, and never of the community."¹ And when he is attacked by the public he shouts out: "Let the curs snap - that is not the worst part of it. The worst is that, from one end of this country to the other, every man is the slave of his Party."²

After finishing these plays one might ask whether More and Stockmann are justified in their behaviour. It seems at first sight that these men are admirable for sticking fast to their ideas. In so doing they follow the trend of many a Great Teacher of the world who chose to die than to abandon his faith. But what I would like to discuss further is More's faith itself in The Mob. Is it worth - while for Stephen More to live up to it in spite of all the hardships, danger and even death?

1. Ibsen : An Enemy of the People (1930),

p. 206

2. Ibid, p. 229

His idea is that great countries like his own have got to change the ways in dealing with smaller and much weaker nations. They should by no means avenge the insults received from smaller nations since they are not equals. The idea is undoubtedly a good one, but Banning, one of the deputation who has been trying to make More give up the idea of lecturing everywhere against the war, points to other relevant facts: "... I won't say that your views weren't sound enough before the fighting ~~ing~~ began. But our blood's being spilled; and that makes all the difference"¹ According to the law of nature, a big boy who is insulted and attacked by a smaller one will naturally give him a just punishment to teach him in return. Only one out of a hundred is able to keep calm and let the smaller one go on insulting him. This is also the way of nearly all countries in the world. People's love of themselves, which embraces home and country, drives them to fight fiercely or, in the eyes of some, selfishly for what they love. More knows this and realizes that he cannot help the situation for the advantage of a certain small country. His is only a single, hardly audible voice amidst the thunder of angry crowd who are rushing forward to join in the battle. And to make an attempt to stop them would be like "shutting the stable door after the horse has gone."

More is about to take his friends'suggestion to remain neutral when the sounds from the street come to him, "Give the beggars hell, boys ! " "Wipe your feet on their dirty country ! " "Don't leave'em a gory acre ! " ² This makes More change his mind again. Being a sensitive man, More is moved at hearing the emotion, the reasonless words and slogans of the crowd. Action based on reason, yes; but action, bloodshed, merely as the outcome of such incitation, is an outrage against humanity and human dignity. More feels for the weak, perhaps more than they do for themselves. Though he knows that it is useless to fight for them, he is compelled to fight for his principle concerning them no matter how his fight will result in the end: "I'm fighting for the faith that's in me. What else can a man do ? What else ? " ³

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1. Galsworthy : The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929)
p. 392
 2. Ibid, p. 395
 3. Ibid, p. 412

Anyhow, More shows his tremendous courage to live up to his ideal. In so doing, he has to sacrifice all that belongs to him :- his political career, his wealth, friends, wife, daughter, and finally his life; he is killed by the mob which hates him. However the end of the play shows that he is awarded a sort of respect by the leader of the demonstrators who cause his death. Seeing his dead body lying on the floor, their leader picks a little abandoned Union Jack and lays it on More's breast muttering "Poor devil ! He kept his end up anyway ! " ¹ The tawdriness of the flag is perhaps a comment on the tawdriness of the crowd's sentiment, but the gesture is moving for its genuineness at the same time.

This play was very well received in America especially in New York where the run was extended to twice its original length to meet the public's demand. Apart from its own merits, the reason for The Mob's being very popular in America might also come from a characteristic in the American people themselves to which it appealed, that is, their love of freedom in speech, action, and in everything. They are also the worshippers of idealism and therefore they were able to appreciate the character of a man like Stephen More who was strong enough to be faithful to his ideals in whatever circumstances he might be.

A Bit O' Love

The other two of Galsworthy's plays which were produced during the war are A Bit O' Love (1915) and The Foundations (1917). We may say that they fail to capture the audience as well as the reader. A Bit O' Love was recorded as the lowest seller among Galsworthy's printed Plays. But personally Galsworthy seemed to be very fond of this play. He thought that the play had more life and in a way more essence than anything he had done. He said that in writing this play he was more interested in creating the village's atmosphere than in delivering social criticism. The beautiful village-scenes, such as the last scene supposed to be in the full-moon night, and the rustic simplicity of the villagers

1. Ibid, p. 415

are well described; the latter especially can be seen in the gathering of the village girls who are full of mischief, and also in the meeting of the villagers who are furious with their parson; one of them even challenges the parson to a fight but is himself beaten by the parson's knowledge of ju - jitsu.

Galsworthy seems to delight in creating these scenes of village life, but we should be mistaken not to hear in them the undertones of a serious theme, that of "a Christian cast out by Christian society for forgiving". The rejected one is Strangway, the parson himself. His crime is that of forgiving his wife who left him for another man and of not divorcing her. Here again we see Galsworthy harping on his favourite plot of marriage without love. He blames the villagers who, in spite of being Christians, "overlooked the importance of love", both where it can be given, and where it cannot: Strangway's wife, Beatrice, cannot love her husband, and Strangway, will not try to force her to. Unlike most of Galsworthy's women who after leaving their incompatible husbands are seriously condemned and brought to their complete ruin by society as well as by their former husbands (a notable example of such being Clare in The Fugitive), Beatrice is more fortunate. Having a soft - hearted and forgiving husband, she succeeds in asking him to spare her and her new lover. Thus it is Strangway himself who is going to be destroyed for having supported the sinners.

The character of Strangway is rather vague. After finishing the play I still felt that I did not really know him. I do not accuse Galsworthy of creating a characterless character, but rather of portraying a very difficult ungraspable-type: a weak, and tender-hearted parson who entirely collapses after the first blow in his life. His type seems very rare to me. Ofcourse there may be plenty of men like Strangway in this world but I have yet to come across one, and hence the difficulty of understanding him. He is very sentimental; whenever he is alone he will pour out his feelings of painful need for his beloved wife who has deserted him. Yet he is too noble and unselfish to make his wife and her lover suffer, and would rather let them live happily together. He is too impractical to solve his own problem; seeing that he is no longer respected by anybody in his parish, he goes into a barn to hang himself, seeking a solution in suicide. Thus the priest is driven to commit the gravest sin against himself and God. He would have succeeded in doing so if he had

not been hindered by Tibby, an extremely charming little girl who kindled "a bit of love" in his heart and made him decide to start his life anew with more strength and courage to go on until he loves every living thing. The end is inconclusive. We do not really know how Strangway is going to take his new step to reach the idealistic condition he proposes as his aim. Is he going to transfer himself to another parish? (which he should have done long before he came into conflict with his villagers); or is he going to stay in the same parish but as a new man on whom has been bestowed more strength of courage and love?

Thus the play seems to be weakened by all these defects which cannot be compensated for even by the beautiful and natural atmosphere of the village and its simple inhabitants. The following is a very apt criticism from *The Times*:- "Mr. Galsworthy's theme has simplicity of line and dignity of treatment. But, like the moon, it is a little pale Thus, Mr. Galsworthy has achieved beauty, but not energetic beauty....." ¹

The Foundations

The other play of the war years, The Foundations, is the only one that Galsworthy actually wrote during the war. It is about the conflict of people from different classes. Such a theme constantly recurs in Galsworthy's plays: for instance, in The Silver Box, the theme is the inequalities of the law as it affects different classes; in The Eldest Son, the difficulties of marriage between people of different classes; in The Pigeon, the problem between the rich and the poor, and later on in The Skin Game, the conflict between the landed gentry and the newly rich middle class.

In The Foundations, which is set at some imaginary time after the war, we see how the outraged poor set out to attack the rich who have been neglecting them since the end of the war. In his play we see that Galsworthy himself thought it was too late then for the rich to help the poor effectively. They have become too large in number. Besides,

by the time he describes, the poor people have lost all their regard for the rich. Their patience and self -- control have been melted away after the long suffering from hardships and hunger. In Russia this had already happened, and that country was in the throes of a bloody revolution. Could the same thing happen in Britain? Galsworthy seems to suggest that it almost could. "I'll tell yer. If all you wealthy nobles wiv kepitel ad come it kind from the start after the war yer'd never'a been'earing' the Marseillaisy naow.." ¹ says Lemmy, a poor plumber, to Lord Dromondy who has failed to do anything to avert the crisis which now arises between the poor and people of his own class.

Lemmy is a very queer plumber whose mind is wandering too far. He is always thinking and talking about the problems between the 'Lybour' and the 'kepitel' or the 'uvver' people. Sometimes he behaves like a child going around with his false bomb to frighten rich people. His character seems to me unrealistic and therefore unsatisfactory. But perhaps there is some truth in his saying, for examples: "Prophesy wot people want to believe, an' ye're syfe." ² "Cheer oh ! Press ! Yer can always myke somefin'out o' nuffin'...." ³ "If yer went into the foundytions of your wealf - would yer feel like'avin' any ? It all comes from uvver people's ard, unpleasant lybour - it's all built on Muvver as yer might sy. An'if yer daon't get rid o'some of it in bein kind - yer daon't feel syfe nor comfy." ⁴

Lemmy, with his revolutionary sentiments and cockney banter -- which in their effect remind us of the country dialect and rustic sentiments of A Bit O' Love -- is a strangely disturbing character. One can neither take him seriously nor dismiss him lightly. (One's reactions are in fact confused - was Galsworthy himself unsure of how to treat this theme ?).

The more conventional characters, who are easier to respond to than Lemmy, are Anne and Aida. The former is the daughter of Lord Dromondy and the latter, who is a few years older than Anne, is just a poor girl from the slums. They take to each other at first sight.

1. Galsworthy: The Plays of John Galsworthy (1929)

2. Ibid, p. 486

3. Ibid, p. 511

4. Ibid, p. 505

Their part is not only pleasing and amusing, but it also shows that the dislike between classes is in fact artificial. Their innocence and universality are touching; they certainly increase the vitality of the play.

'The Press' also plays an important part in this play. It is the reporter who brings Lemmy, the suspected one, to the house where the bomb was discovered. He thinks of nothing except making sensational news. When he is told that a bomb has been found in the cellar in Lord Dromondy's house he exclaims: "By Jove ! This is a piece of luck ! " But when Lemmy confesses to him afterwards that it is not a real bomb, he cries desperately: "No, no, I can't have it. All my article..... No, d.....it; I'll keep it a bomb ! " ¹ In other words, the press is not primarily interested in the truth, but in sensation, items of news value. The good of the community, peace and good will, are not what it thrives on. Thus, in writing this play Galsworthy not only set before us the problems between the rich and the poor, but he also inserted his point of view about the Press believing that this play might to some extent penetrate their epidermis, and show them how they helped to make trouble rather than avert it. The Foundations is crammed with Galsworthy's opinions. The greater part of the dialogue is a discussion on various subjects such as the definition of middle class people, the relation between capital and labour, the problem of censorship, the responsibilities of the Press, etc. In fact this play seems to be based on intellectual pursuits rather than emotional attitude to surrounding facts. It is more like a collection of opinions and moral teachings which emerge quite distinctly through the thin dramatic flavour of the play, and consequently diminish its vitality.

This is surely one reason why this play was not so popular. Its performance was recorded as being unsuccessful and it also met with financial failure. In this play, as in A Bit O' Love, there seems to be a basic confusion in Galsworthy's treatment of his themes which are fundamentally of deep seriousness: i.e. - the question of loveless marriage which ends in the husband's contemplating suicide in A Bit O' Love, and the revolution of the poor people in The Foundations. Laughter, if it has any place in their treatment, must be subordinate

1. Ibid, p. 511

and come only as relief of the tension. But in these two plays the tension itself is reduced to laughter. The seriousness of the themes is distorted and treated in an unreasonably frivolous manner by the chief characters themselves who appear to be rather silly and comical. Perhaps Galsworthy, in writing these two plays, was experimenting with a new style in treating serious matters in a lighter and more humorous way than he had used hitherto. But we find it very difficult to respond to his new style. It is like seeing a consciously serious and well preserved man making a joke of himself. We are all confused, and perhaps Galsworthy himself was too; we can see that he soon gave up this experiment when we pass over to his next play, The Skin Game, the atmosphere of which is one of dead seriousness. Of course there are humorous passages in it, but they come in only as minor relief, having nothing to do with the main theme of the plays at all.