

LETTERS - AND - ART

LITERATURE DRAMA MUSIC FINE-ARTS EDUCATION CULTURE

A PEACE PLAY ACCUSED OF WAR

TO SEE WAR in a play where it is never mentioned requires an acumen possessed seemingly only by our native critics. The struggle of an upstart manufacturer to win social recognition from an aristocratic British squire in John Galsworthy's latest piece, "The Skin Game," is discerned here to be nothing less than Germany's effort to share Britain's "place in the sun." When the piece was produced in London in May the critics there overlooked all this, which gives our observers a chance to show superior perspicacity. Mr. Broun and Mr. Woolcott, of the *New York Tribune* and *Times*, treat it from the war point of view, tho Mr. Broun gives his compeer credit for the original discovery. Galsworthy's other play, "The Mob," now showing at another theater in this city, is confessedly a war-play, but it was written before the world-struggle. "The Skin Game" is "a play which has come after the great struggle," says Mr. Broun, "and this time Mr. Galsworthy's indictment of warfare in general is more sweeping and better than in 'The Mob.'" The latter play deals with wars of conquest; but "The Skin Game" takes "the position that, however just the cause, even the combatant who starts with clean hands must take on something of evil and degradation." It may be recalled that Galsworthy's other plays, notably "Strife," dealt with the general thesis that contentions between men or groups or nations usually exhaust if not ruin the combatants and leave the question in dispute where it started. Since Mr. Broun expresses some surprize that British critics failed to catch the point, we give the account of the play appearing in the *Manchester Guardian*:

"'The Skin Game' means war for the skin of your adversary, but every one who knows Mr. John Galsworthy's work will know that it is really played with pity and reserves and compunctions. At the St. Martin's we are back in the world of his 'Country House,' but the squire is only middle-aged. His wife is a creature of steel and enigma. She is the one unrealized person in the play, and as the night went on she seemed more and more a visitor in her own house, hardly on speaking terms with her human invertebrate husband and her human and wilful daughter.

"The advisory of the household is *Hornblower*, a new-rich manufacturer, who, dreading that terrible Victorian doom, 'cut by the county,' seeks to smoke out his chief enemy by buying land in front of his park and setting up factories there. The squire's wife carries the fray into the manufacturer's quarters by using her knowledge of the guilty secret of his daughter-in-law. It is not cricket, but it is the skin game. And so the manufacturer is beaten, parts with the land, and drops £6,000.

"Thus is the country-house preserved. But what is the cost? The guilty lady tries to commit suicide and recovers, but her unborn child is dead. The home life of the manufacturer is broken, his dynastic ambitions are in ruins, and moreover he sees that the class that he fought, and fought because he thought that they had something fine that he hadn't, are hypocrites.

"An estrangement would fall like a curtain between the squire's wife and her husband and child if Mr. Galsworthy had not convinced us that such a curtain existed at the beginning. The squire ponders in the end with the word 'hypocrite' ringing in his ears. 'We began the game with clean hands—have we clean hands now?' His other reflection is, 'What is our gentility worth if it can not stand fire?' 'We did it all,' he said, 'to keep our old home.' 'I am not enjoying home to-night,' said the daughter."

The treatment of this situation, as the Englishman sees it, flows from character and not historical happenings:

"Mr. Galsworthy, as ever, holds the balance straight. The *parvenu* states his case, and states it massively, against the established people who are not obnoxious because they don't want anything more. They have got all the advantages and have nothing to do but live. The squire puts his case with effective understatement and is altogether an ideal squire. The first quarrel is over *Hornblower's* eviction of two cottagers after promising at the sale that he would not disturb them. He points out that little things can't stand in the way of great operations by which thousands of workmen can live and help to refurbish the earth. His sons are presentable, and the younger flirts with the squire's daughter. The daughter-in-law is one of these dark flowers from the underworld, replanted in love and security, in which Mr. Galsworthy believes and of which he has the secret.

"Over the whole play there is that sense of fate, or something more modern, smaller than fate, which impels human beings by the momentum of the wrong they have done to go on deeper and deeper till they are up to the tips of their souls. There is less beauty in the play than in any other of his. It is as tho the author were determined to show the public that he could be as fierce and sudden as the best of them, and he had sought to strike the note with his brutal title. But it was to no purpose, for his virtues and weaknesses are here as usual. This is one of the most interesting plays he has given us, but it has not the rhythm that ran through those plays where he concentrated more on one character which dictated the whole movement."

The ingenious Mr. Broun is not abetted by his fellow critics of *The Evening Post*, *The Herald*, or *The World*. The last, indeed, sees only "a clothes-line fight." Still, when symbolism is your quarry, you can often find much of it. Mr. Broun presents his case:

"To be sure, war is not once mentioned in 'The Skin Game,' which is laid in 'a remote country district in England.' There are no guns and no marching troops. The war-theme is entirely within a solution of symbolism, and yet it is easily grasped for all the fact that it is not obtruded.

"We don't see how it can be missed, and yet few, if any, of the English reviewers read such a meaning into the play.

"Mr. Galsworthy seems to have had Germany, England, and Belgium in mind, and if we had the printed play at hand it would be easy to point out a score of speeches which bear out the theory. Of course it may be prest too far, and there were those who greeted the explanation by insisting that if it were so the author probably intended the butler, who spoke one line in the second act, to be Montenegro, and the off-stage noises to be Japan.

"As a matter of fact, it is possible to overlook the symbolism, because the story, taken simply for its face value, is intensely interesting. With the added factor it seems to us a still better play, exceedingly biting and effective in its irony. Nevertheless 'The Skin Game' falls a little short of the very best of Galsworthy, altho it is one of his fine plays. Here and there it is marred by excessive melodrama. There is, for instance, an impossible scene in which a maid steals into a room unobserved by the occupant and hides behind a screen and later tiptoes out again without being seen by two people. Also an auction scene in which the *Hillcrist*s and the *Hornblower*s are bidding against each other for a certain piece of property, altho effective, is too tricky. Mr. Galsworthy has arranged that the scene shall be played directly toward the audience with bids coming from folk in the orchestra. All these are imaginary except the final one, which is bawled out by an actor who sneaks down the aisle just in the nick of time. The characters on the stage identify the various people who are supposed to be taking part in the auction by pointing out over the footlights. We were somewhat abashed when the heroine leveled a finger directly at us and said, 'There's the big bounder now.'"

THE POSTER ART OF "SOVDEPIA"

BOLSHEVIK ART in Russia has been many times described as the extreme of futurism. Anything so important as propaganda, however, is quite evidently not entrusted to so bizarre a medium. Some specimens of posters brought "with great difficulty" from Russia by an Englishman named Keeling are reproduced in the *London Sphere*, and are seen to follow the most reactionary pencils of the old régime. A note makes the observation that "in a country such as Russia, where over four-fifths of the population is, or, at any rate, was illiterate," propaganda has "naturally taken the form of pictures wherever possible." The posters, taken in the order of their sequence in this department, are thus described by the *Sphere* writer, who remains anonymous:

"The first one, showing the upper half of the nude figure of a man vigorously using a pickax upon a somewhat misty-looking dragon—or is it a snake?—reads, 'Death to the Suffocators and Oppressors of the Workers and Peasants,' and 'Fight for the Volga, Fight for Bread for the Starving,' and was, no doubt, published at the time when the Volga was more or less under the control of the 'Whites,' or in danger of being taken possession of by them.

"The second poster is very effective, and clearly shows the appalling state of the workers under the old régime, altho it has lost somewhat through being reduced in size and losing its coloring. In the original the effect of the poster, with its half-nude, emaciated figures of men and women in fetters carrying the three oppressors of the working people—the Czar, the priest, and the capitalist—was admirably calculated to play upon the imaginations of the Russians. It is possible, however, that many of the Russians look upon this poster as being somewhat ironical, or even quite simply, where they can not read, as an allegory of their present position.

"The other two are especially interesting to us because they were evoked by the Allied attempt to crush Bolshevism, or I ought to say, rather, the Allied attempt to free Russia from Bolshevism by military intervention. The 'Red' soldier, with his arm stretched out across the red, five-pointed star, is crying out, 'Citizens, give up your arms.' As a matter of fact, from the very beginning of the Bolshevik rule the possession of any kind of arms by an ordinary citizen without a very special permission—and even with it sometimes—right down to an empty cartridge case, has been punishable by death. This poster could not have been very effective, since it was less risky quietly to destroy anything in the way of firearms than take the risk of admitting that they had been in one's possession by voluntarily giving them up.

"The last poster shows the attack of the 'Imperialists' upon Soviet Russia. Altho only one of the three defenders of the 'Red' flag has a rifle—and that of very doubtful make—the reinforcements which are to be seen coming rapidly up on the left, with some armored cars in the background which looks as if they had been designed by Mr. Heath Robinson, promise to make the attack more difficult for the long line of soldiers of every nationality which is seen winding away until it is lost in the distance.

"The first onslaught, it will be noticed, appears to have been made by a native of Asia and a native of Africa. This is, no doubt, meant to show to the poor Russian how fond the people of those perfidious countries whose representatives are following close behind are of forcing the poor heathen to do their dirty work."

These posters with scores, if not hundreds, of others of a similar character, we are told, are to be seen absolutely everywhere in "Sovdepiä." "The inside and outside of all the public buildings (and their name is legion) are covered with them—no doubt hoardings would have been, too, only they were pulled down for firewood long ago—and the railway stations are a 'sight for sore eyes.'" These are not the only places where the message screams at the wayfarer:

"At the larger railway stations there is a special propaganda room, where, in addition to the posters and piles of literature, there is a gramophone busy day and night grinding out communistic songs and speeches. Even in the prisons these posters have penetrated. Prisoners who wish to curry favor with the Bolshevik inspectors, who sometimes come to look around, cover the walls of their cells with these posters—which they are allowed to buy cheaply—and portraits of the leaders of the Bolshevik Government. It may be added that this does not endear them to their fellow prisoners, or even the warders.

"One would not be surprized to learn that this constantly reiterated propaganda in favor of the Bolshevik rule achieved



"DEATH TO THE SUFFOCATORS."

In colors of flame this heroic figure of Bolshevism aims his blows at a monster with nebulous body sprouting snakes. Other posters are pictured on the following pages.

its object, especially when one adds to it the newspaper and the absence of any other source of information. Yet it is not so.

"Clever and persistent as it is and showing an almost uncanny knowledge of the psychology of the Russian worker and peasant, it has failed because, after all, 'an ounce of fact is worth a pound of theory.' The people who introduced and recommended Bolshevism promised their supporters peace, the possession of the land, and plenty. Up to the present there has been no peace; starvation instead of plenty, and altho they have been given the land, after a fashion, they can not do anything with it for want of the simplest necessities, including seeds."

OXFORD'S FRIENDLY GESTURE TO GERMANY—The hand of fellowship has been extended to German and Austrian professors by some half-hundred professors and members of learned societies of Oxford, and opposition is aroused in some quarters. The *London Times* finds it "singularly ill-advised and inopportune," and regrets that the step has been taken. It assumes also that the "great majority of Oxford men" will not coincide. A different opinion is expressed over here by the *New York World*:

"But why may it not be assumed with equal probability that the university authorities have taken an advanced position on pacification with which enlightened public opinion will agree in the end? It has happened before that Oxford ideas at variance with popular sentiment were eventually triumphant.

"No doubt, with the wounds of war still unhealed, the proffer of an olive-branch to the foe of England's great university excites a perfectly natural antagonism at home. But if 'the embitterment of animosities is to be dispelled,' as the Oxford conciliators represent, how is reconciliation to be effected more logically than through 'the fellowship of learning'? And if friendly intercourse is ever to be resumed, why not now, when the resumption involves concession? Germany can not always be kept out of the fold. At least the Oxford professors regard the war as over, and the example will have a good effect on public sentiment among all nations now released from the throes of passion."