

(2) "The Strike at Arlingford"

The Independent Theatre has lately produced two new plays by novices in the art of playwriting, though both experienced writers in other branches of literature. Both are concerned with the discussion of social problems, but while Mr. Bernard Shaw's *Widower's Houses* is an ill-constructed burlesque, whose only function is as a medium for certain views about the desirability of the London County Council and the cruel indifference of the middle classes, Mr. George Moore's *Strike at Arlingford* is a drama of modern life in the truest sense. Perhaps this is precisely the reason that the former is referred to by *The Daily Chronicle* as Mr. Shaw's masterpiece, and Mr. George Moore's has been freely abused by all sides, for most men would rather hear a definite opinion even from the opposite side than have a political question put with the impartiality of a true artist. They would not have minded if Mr. Moore had used for the dramatic *milieu* in which his characters are revealed some social crisis of the long past, but they exclaim in disgust when the struggle between Labour and Capital is represented without bias. G. Flaubert, who always held that this indifference to particular views was not only a duty to Art but the highest service it could render to morality, and partook of something of the nature of a revelation of divine justice, suffered in a similar way when his play *Le Candidate* was produced. Both

parties would have liked the other to have been painted in all the lurid gruesomeness with which their own heated political imagination invested them.

But it is perhaps hardly true to say that this play gives us a picture of the struggles between capital and labour—that is rather an incident, a mechanism of the stage whereby the particular types Mr. Moore has chosen are brought into contrast with one another, and thereby reveal their essential characteristics. Of course the two things are complementary; the forces which are at war are behind the characters of his play and impel them to destruction or success, and it is with the characters that we are primarily concerned all through; but inasmuch as these characters are broadly typical of those who become involved as leaders in the social struggle, we get an insight, not, it is true, into the nature of the forces themselves, but into the directions they are likely to take by the nature of those characters through which they become articulate. I suppose this lies at the bottom of the accusation that the play is commonplace, and not the sort of thing the Independent Theatre need concern itself with. Personally I am much more interested in the question of whether the play is good in itself; whether its types (commonplace or not is surely a matter of complete unimportance) are drawn in the fewest possible strokes, and whether the essential qualities are clearly accentuated. To me there is no doubt that the answer must be in the affirmative.

The plot is quite clearly worked out. Lady Anne Travers was, as a girl, in love with John Reed, her father's secretary; she threw him over to marry a rich husband, and is at the opening of the play a widow, and owner of the mine at Arlingford. The miners have just struck for a rise of twenty per cent in wages; at this rate it is impossible to keep on the mine, which would, therefore, have to be abandoned. She calls in to aid her Baron Steinbach, whose previous advances have been favourably received by her. She, however, only asks for his help, and refuses to talk of love. He promises to help her with advice, or, if she will marry him, with all his immense resources. She refuses the second part, and he agrees to see the miners' deputation for her. The deputation comes in, headed by Ellen Sands and John Reed, who are engaged to be married. Ellen Sands is a type of fanatic who in past times acted as martyr, prophetess, rivalist, and so forth, but nowadays figures as an irrational force in labour disputes. John Reed is a man of refined and poetical instincts, who is attracted to Socialism rather as a field for chivalrous self-devotion than from any very serious political convictions or sympathy with those whom he leads. Baron Steinbach offers a rise of five per cent in wages, which is flatly refused by Ellen Sands, but on his addressing the men and explaining the impossibility of their demands, they are inclined to give in;

but, after a clever piece of rhetoric from John Reed, their firmness is restored. He, however, stays behind the rest, and is convinced, partly by an examination of the books, and partly by the fascinations unscrupulously exerted by his former lover, that the rise of five per cent is all that they can justly demand, and promises to exert his influence to stop the strike.

Meanwhile, by an ingenious move, Baron Steinbach has got a scandalous version of the story of Lady Anne's love for Reed into the local papers, knowing that, on the one hand, the idea of a *liaison* between herself and a Socialist leader will cause a revulsion of feeling on her part; and, secondly, that it will ruin John Reed in the eyes of his followers. Reed is completely won back to his former love, in spite of the fierce inroads of Ellen Sands into Lady Anne's drawing-room at various inopportune moments. Just as he is succeeding in getting the men to agree to Lady Anne's terms, he receives a cheque for £2,000 from sympathizers with the strike. To announce this would enable them to persist in their terms, which one is given to suppose are really impossible, and mean ultimately the ruin not only of Lady Anne, but of the miners themselves.

The climax of the play is reached at this point in the mental struggle of the hero, who dreads the dishonesty of delaying to announce the arrival of the cheque. On the other hand is his love for Lady Anne, and a genuine conviction that to help the men to hold out means their ultimate ruin.

He finally decides to suppress the cheque, but it is suggested that this is rather from the former than the latter motive. Then Ellen Sands enters; it is known that a cheque has been sent, but not received, and John Reed is suspected: she asks him to deny it, telling him that unless she can take a denial from him to the men, his life is in danger. He refuses to deny it, and says he will go and speak to the men. A similar struggle is seen between Ellen Sands' love for Reed and her principles, but it is not a doubtful one, for to her principles are everything. Reed, therefore, goes and tells the now infuriated strikers what he has done, while Lady Anne and the Baron watch him from a window. The mob have become ungovernable, and Baron Steinbach persuades Lady Anne to fly with him. They are just starting when John Reed, who has fought his way through the crowd and escaped, enters and sees that the Baron has won his lover, who naturally goes off with Steinbach, showing only a decent amount of feminine distress at the condition of the man she has ruined, and is about to betray.

Lady Anne and her lover go off and leave Reed with Ellen Sands, to whom he puts his case simply, and obtains her consent to his committing suicide, whereupon the curtain descends.

There is surprising ingenuity shown in this construction; the charac-

ters are made to stand out in strong contrast to one another, like the forms of an elaborately interwoven pattern, and, I think, without more exaggeration of the types than is necessary to make them clear and decisive in a short drama. The dialogue is good; the epigrams are written, and not spoken, but show a clear grasp of the strength and weakness of Socialism, though perhaps, as the brains in this case are mostly on the side of capital, they may appear one-sided, the force of the Labour Party depending on the fanaticism of Ellen Sands, who could not be made to commit an epigram without seriously destroying the unity of her character. Finally, the interest of the play never flags, one clear dramatic situation following another without any medium of padding; and one can only hope that it will have a chance of being seen by a more general audience than the Independent Theatre allows.

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