FOREWORD

Among Russians who grew up under Stalin, John Galsworthy is as famous as Shakespeare. This may seem extraordinary, but becomes easier to understand on reading *The Island Pharisees*. It is rare for an English writer to produce such a corrosive critique not merely of British society, but of the British character. Had he lived during the Cold War, Galsworthy might have been arraigned for giving comfort to the enemy.

Published in 1904, *The Island Pharisees* was the first book to carry Galsworthy's name. (Four earlier ones appeared under the pseudonym of John Sinjohn.) With it he began what he considered his most important work, describing its genesis as 'a period of ferment and transition . . . a kind of long awakening to the home truths of social existence and national character'. Two years after its appearance he would become famous, thanks to his play *The Silver Box* and his novel *The Man of Property* – the first part of the Forsyte Saga.

The Island Pharisees, then, may be seen as a knock on the door. Though not a mature work, it is full of energy and ideas, and announces the themes which were to preoccupy its author – social injustice and, in particular, the treatment of women.

It is with an incident involving a penniless woman that the story begins. Richard Shelton has just returned from a holiday in France, during which he has become engaged to the sweet and beautiful Antonia Dennant, when he boards a train at Dover and meets two young foreigners. One is a frightened girl to whom he gives money; the other is a vagabond by the name of Ferrand, who, though shabbily dressed, is well educated and highly articulate. Ferrand's caustic observations about the world set Shelton on an odyssey through British society that will change his life.

There are obvious parallels between Shelton and his creator. Like Galsworthy, he is an Oxford graduate from a wealthy family;

he has trained for the Bar, but decided not to practise; and he has travelled the world. Galsworthy was 34 when he began the book, while Shelton is 32. But how far the author agrees with Shelton's perception of life is something the reader must decide for himself.

Shelton was not the original focus of the book. In a preface to *Villa Rubein and Other Stories,* written 19 years later, Galsworthy explains that the first draft consisted of 'a picaresque string of anecdotes told by Ferrand in the first person'. He sent this draft to his friend Edward Garnett, who told him that he was 'not sufficiently inside Ferrand's skin' – whereupon he 'started afresh in the skin of Shelton'.

It was Ferrand, however, who fascinated Galsworthy – so much so that he used him again in his 1912 play *The Pigeon*. He was, Galsworthy wrote, 'drawn very much from life', being based on 'a true vagabond' he met on the Champs Elysées. A born rebel, Ferrand impresses Shelton as a man of the world who has 'seen and felt ten times as much as I' and 'made a start in some fresh journey through the fields of thought'. Yet, while he has a merciless eye for other people's shortcomings, Ferrand is blind to his own flaws, which prevent him from applying himself to anything: as a friend of the Dennants remarks, he has 'too strong a faculty of criticism'. Shelton recognises Ferrand's limitations, but cannot escape his vision of the world, which works on the Englishman like grit in an oyster.

'A self-righteous person; a hypocrite' is the dictionary definition of a Pharisee, and it is this type – with a veneer of complacency that Ferrand considers peculiarly English – that Shelton begins to see everywhere. Galsworthy's highly schematised novel, arranged as a series of vignettes of almost identical length, might be compared to a cabinet of curiosities, with the reader's eye being led from one compartment of society to the next: the theatre, the dosshouse, the gentleman's club, the Oxford college – each is scrutinised, and excoriated, in its turn.

Galsworthy’s particular target is the air of moral superiority assumed by the rich: it is only good fortune, he insists, that separates the fashionable lady from the prostitute.

Such criticism might be levelled at many societies, but – as Shelton perceives it – the situation is exacerbated by his fellow –countrymen’s geographical and intellectual insularity, their Philistinism and their suppression of emotion for the sake of good form. In one memorable scene an Oxford don, appalled by *Madame Bovary*, dismisses Flaubert with the withering remark: ‘Imagine a man writing that kind of stuff if he’d ever been to Eton!’

As disgust with the status quo engulfs Shelton, only Antonia’s goodness and innocence offer an antidote. Twelve years younger than he is, she has a vision of a brave new world in which great victories are to be won; her relatives, though aware that ‘things are not what they ought to be’, warn Shelton off trying to disillusion her. Whether Antonia’s optimism will triumph over his pessimism is a question that fills the last chapters of the book with suspense.

Galsworthy’s pen portrait of Antonia’s mother, who keeps ‘all her ideas so tidy that no foreign notions might creep in’, gives a foretaste of his mature work; so does the episode in which her husband and Shelton take cover from a rainstorm and spend its duration desperately avoiding the subject of Antonia. Shelton’s minute observation of the downpour – ‘how the raindrops darted at the leaves like spears, and how the leaves shook themselves a hundred times a minute, while little runnels of water, ice-clear, rolled over their edges, soft and quick’ – is one of several vivid, painterly descriptive passages that illuminate the book.

Above all, *The Island Pharisees* is remarkable as a social document that brings together in a short space an extraordinary variety of characters and milieus. Galsworthy began it in 1901, and what he offers is a snapshot – in anything but soft focus – of

Britain as it passes from the triumphant Victorian age to the more equivocal Edwardian, with injustices that have been too long ignored about to find a resounding voice.

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