

LIFE THROUGH FICTION

By Charles A. Bennett

III: LOYALTIES

Most plays or novels worth the name do more than tell a story, portray a character: they reflect an attitude toward life, a philosophy on the part of the author. Moreover, since they present individual situations rather than "cases", they suggest that to live well is not a matter of being guided by authoritative rules whether of church or of academic precept or of tradition, but is rather a fine art. The aim of this series of articles — of which this is the third — is to take a few literary works and discuss some of the ethical issues involved. The clinical method employed is designed to bring home to readers how drama and fiction contribute to the criticism of life, in the sense of an intelligent understanding of life's problem.

Synopsis

FERDINAND DE LEVIS, a Jew, described as "young, rich, and new", is staying with the Winsors at their country place near Newmarket. The other guests are General Canynge, Captain Dancy — fast, reckless, desperately hard up — his wife Mabel, and Margaret Orme, a society girl. Some time ago Dancy had sold De Levis a mare which at the time he thought rather a weed. De Levis has just sold it for a thousand pounds cash. On the night when the play opens this money is stolen from him. He had put the notes under his pillow, locked the door of his room (but left the window open), and gone down the corridor to take a bath. On his return the notes have disappeared. He goes at once to his host and tells him. General consternation. The servants are sent for and interviewed. The guests come in and discuss the situation. The police are summoned. Two things become clear. First, that in contrast to De Levis, whose only desire is naturally to get to the bottom of the affair, Winsor and his guests, outraged at the suggestion of a theft in the house, are concerned

to avoid anything like a scene and still more a scandal. Secondly, De Levis, by many subtle indications from servants and guests alike, is made to feel an outsider. A man should not have as much money as that anyhow. And think of his actually locking his door! And then to insist on sending for the police! The effect of their attitude on a nature oversensitive to any implied criticism of his social position or his race is only to make him more obstinate in his resolution to thrash the thing out.

De Levis discovers unmistakable evidence that the thief is Dancy, who had come in by the window. He accuses Dancy to Winsor and Canynge. Even though they have also come to the same conclusion about the identity of the thief they decide that they will stand by him as against the Jew, for the issue has insensibly changed from a question of justice to a conflict of loyalties. Officers and gentlemen must stick by one another against an outsider who cannot be expected to feel the claims of their code. If De Levis persists in his accusation and in his demand for the return of the money they threaten to blackball him at a club of

which he wishes to become a member and to ruin him socially.

They fulfil their threat. De Levis, hearing at the club that he has been blackballed, openly denounces Dancy to some of the members. They confront him with Dancy and urge Dancy to take the matter to court "for the honour of the club". Dancy makes a poor showing and refuses. De Levis has meanwhile decided to institute proceedings against Dancy. Dancy, realizing that the game is up, tries to persuade his wife (to whom he has not confessed) to leave the country with him. Doubts assail her. She chokes them down and urges him to fight the case. "Ronny! If all the world — I'd believe in you. You know I would." "That's all right Mabs. That's all right. . . . Well, what shall we do?" "Oh! Let's go to that lawyer — let's go at once!"

While the case is proceeding, three months later, Twisden, Dancy's solicitor, unexpectedly receives information that enables him to trace some of the missing notes. They had been paid by Dancy to a woman who had claims upon him. Twisden's partner urges him to overlook his client's guilt. "If De Levis got these notes back, and the rest of the money, anonymously?" "But the case, Graviter; the case." "I don't believe this alters what I've been thinking." "Thought is one thing — knowledge is another. There's duty to our profession. Ours is a fine calling. On the faith of solicitors a very great deal hangs." Twisden tells Dancy's lawyer, who thereupon throws up the case. Before Dancy can escape from England the police come to his flat with the warrant for his arrest. His wife now knows all, but she sends Dancy into the bedroom and herself opens the door to the inspector. She pleads with him. "Just

half an hour! Couldn't you? It's two lives — two whole lives. We've only been married four months. Come back in half an hour. It's such a little thing — nobody will know. Nobody. Won't you?"

"No, no — don't you try to undermine me — I'm sorry for you; but don't you try it!" As the inspector turns the handle of the bedroom door there is a pistol shot within. Dancy has killed himself. He leaves a note for his friend Colford. "This is the only decent thing I can do. It's too damned unfair to her. It's only another jump. A pistol keeps faith. Look after her." Margaret Orme, hearing it read, exclaims wildly, "Keeps faith! We've all done that. It's not enough."

The subtitle of this play might well be: "A Tragedy with a Moral". As for the tragedy — that is summed up in Margaret Orme's reply to Mabel Dancy's claim that "loyalty comes before everything": "Ye-es, but loyalties cut up against each other sometimes you know." And she adds later, "We all cut each other's throats from the best of motives." It is precisely what is good in the characters of these people that becomes a source of evil and precipitates the catastrophe. *Esprit de corps*, loyalty to one's race or nation, professional conscientiousness, personal fidelity — these are excellent things, yet, in this play, from the moment that they are touched into life they become agents of destruction. De Levis is stiffened in his attitude. Winsor, Canynge, and the rest think only of their class or their code or their club. The old solicitor wraps himself firmly in the cloak of professional duty. Mabel Dancy resolves to "fight tooth and nail". It has been said that in our hours of weakness our very strength fights against us. Their capacity for

loyalty is the conspicuous excellence of these characters, yet in their weakness it works to their undoing; it generates obstinacy, cruelty, injustice, and hatred. The art of the dramatist consists in suggesting that, given these characters, with their training, their ideals, and their points of sensitiveness or scruple, and given this particular situation, the result is inevitable. That, in brief, seems to be the genesis and the development of the tragedy. There is nothing to be said except that life is like that. Which is perhaps all that the artist, as artist, wanted to show us.

But the tragedy has a moral, and the moral at any rate offers opportunities for discussion. "Keeps faith!" cries Maragaret Orme. "We've all done that. It's not enough." When I ask myself why it is not enough I find that I have to distinguish in this play three kinds of loyalty, different both in nature and value. They may be called social or group loyalty, professional loyalty, and personal fidelity.

The first is exemplified, on the one hand, in the attitude of De Levis; on the other, in that of Winsor and his friends. Men belong to various groups and participate vicariously in the fortunes of their group. If my country, my university, my family, my club, win a victory, that is my victory also; if they are insulted, I am insulted too. A man's life and interests for the most part benefit from the amplitude thus conferred on them. For it is a mistake to suppose that there is any necessary conflict between loyalty and a sane individualism. The individual who has a cause to which he is devoted is likely to be a happier and a more significant human being than the man who prides himself on an independence which rejects all social claims. But there is a danger in the fact that one's

country, one's family, and the rest do not stand for any effective work in the world that can be easily identified. What is the function or "job" that my family or my country has to perform? It is hard to say. And since one cannot define the end to which the group is instrumental one naturally begins to think of the group as an end in itself. Its solidarity and dignity now become of paramount importance, and to these even moral issues are subordinated. This is what has happened with Winsor and Canynge as well as with De Levis. Canynge says to De Levis, "You appear to have your breed on the brain, sir." De Levis might have retorted that Canynge has "officers and gentlemen" on the brain. Both sides have reached a point where they are unable to discuss the case on its merits or to play fair, because they are primarily concerned to defend some vague and idealized corporate entity in the background. It is this kind of unintelligent loyalty to an established group simply as a group that is the most pernicious in its consequences. It sunders men into clans and classes and castes and sects, suspicious, snobbish, bigoted, intransigent. The psychologist, I suppose, would call it herd instinct—as a scientific classification, absurd, but as a means of conveying the moral flavor of the thing perhaps not inappropriate.

The old solicitor and the police inspector represent a second kind of loyalty. The line of their duty has been marked out for them by their professional undertakings and they cannot depart from it without lowering their standards. Our sympathy, as spectators, is divided. On the one hand, a departure from the code seems but a slight sacrifice to make when the lives and happiness of at least two human beings are at stake. Turn a blind eye, we are inclined to say, to your profes-

sional integrity and save these two young people. On the other hand, reflection shows that we dare not allow men the right to violate their instructions or to make exceptions to professional obligations whenever they see fit. The resulting insecurity would be intolerable. This division of our sympathy reflects the familiar conflict between the rigidity of principle and the plasticity and variability of life. A moral principle must undertake to cover all contingencies relevant to it; the man of principle is the man you can rely on. But life is continually presenting us with unique situations for which our principles do not provide. Thus we know that there are occasions when one must lie, when the soldier must disobey orders; when the doctor does right to put a merciful if unauthorized end to a patient's hopeless sufferings. Yet because of the weakness of human nature we dare not publicly admit this in formulating our moral code; we should have a crop of doubtful or positively mischievous exceptions. And so we state our moral commands — Be truthful, Be obedient, and the rest — as though they held unconditionally. Thus arise those dilemmas in conduct where whichever course a man adopts he does wrong: if he violates principle, he does wrong; if he sticks to principle he fails to do justice to the novel elements in the situation before him. That is precisely the kind of dilemma in which Twisden and the inspector find themselves. That is what gives to their loyalty a tragic poignancy and inevitability lacking in the first problem.

If we still feel inclined to question the worth of their kind of loyalty I suppose it is because we fear that they will err on the side of conservatism. Their allegiance to the standards or etiquette of their professions will be-

come mechanical. The formal observance of the code will become more important in their eyes than real contributions to human welfare. The letter of the law will kill the spirit. We dread a too zealous loyalty as we dread a too zealous moral idealism: such terrible things are done in their name. We cut each other's throats — from the best of motives.

Mabel Dancy's loyalty to her husband has the same quality of unswerving faithfulness. Hers is the "dog loyalty" that endures through thick and thin. Although, to a superficial regard, it looks as blind and mechanical, we do not condemn it. On the contrary, we prize it. Husband and wife, mother and son, friend and friend — in such intimate personal relationships the attitude which says "No matter what you do I shall continue to believe in you and to stand by you" seems beautiful and proper. Why? There is surely nothing admirable in believing something in face of all evidence to the contrary. That is mere stupid obstinacy. Such a policy can be justified only on a certain theory of what love is. Love is not mere emotion: it is first and foremost a revelation. Two persons who love each other have won an insight into each other's personality which is based not so much on actual performance as on immediate intuition. Love confers a vision of what the other person really is, that essence of him which is so often concealed rather than revealed by overt speech and conduct. The lover, then, is not so much blind to what the world calls the facts or the evidence as in possession of additional evidence. The loyalty that accompanies love is the faith in that vision. As for its practical value I think we may say this: that often the only way by which an individual can be recalled to his best self

is by knowing another person who unchangeably treats him as though that best self were his real self. Faithfulness may thus reawaken the quality in which it believes. So the mysterious impartiality of a God who maketh His sun to rise upon the evil and upon the good may soften the heart of the offender. This kind of loyalty is not a substitute for what I have called vision or insight, but after the mutual revelation has once occurred, if it fade from the mind of one, the faithfulness of the other is justified as its abiding witness and representative.

The preceding analysis helps us to formulate the moral of the play. What is attacked is not loyalty as such but the disastrous doctrine that loyalty comes before everything. That doctrine would be valid only in a perfect society where all the proper objects of human devotion had been discovered and established and where, in consequence, there was no work for either criticism or innovation to perform. Make it supreme in an admittedly imperfect society and you put a ban upon originality whether in the person of the critic, the reformer, the revolutionary, or the prophet. By persisting in conserving the established order of social groupings or morals or institutions political, economic, or ecclesiastical, you conserve what is bad along with what is good. Legitimate criticism or protest is branded as "kicking" or "knocking", innovation as crankiness, eccentricity, or "Bolshevism". The means through which social improvement might come are all dismissed from consideration as forms of disloyalty.

There is a kind of loyalty which hardly figures in this play, although

Twisden and the inspector come nearest to displaying its temper. A brief description of it may help to modify the generally unfavorable judgment with which Galsworthy leaves us. I mean a man's loyalty to his "job". The ship's company who must bring the ship to port no matter what the hazards or the difficulties may be, the doctor and the clergyman whose duty may require them to face the risk of infection or may summon them out in all weathers and at any hour. We may note three distinguishing marks about it. First, as contrasted with the loyalties of a De Levis or a Winsor or a Mabel Dancy which chime in all too nicely with their natural desires, it costs something: it demands sacrifices. Not that sacrifice in itself is praiseworthy, but it measures the amount of a man's disinterestedness. Secondly, it is given not to a social group as such, but to something less narrowly personal—to "the job". Yet it binds men together by the social tie of partnership in a common undertaking which they have resolved to see through. But the social tie does not come first: the partners are loyal to one another because they are first loyal to their enterprise. Thirdly, the job is not a vague cause or ideal: there is a perfectly definite thing to be done: the ship has to be saved; the sick man has to be visited. Thus loyalty by being made practical escapes the danger of evaporating into emotion or sentimentality. It here possesses its proper worth just because, instead of "coming before everything", it is subordinated to the concrete good that is to be done. A man sees that first and then is loyal to his commitment.

NEW LAMPS OR OLD

By Clemence Dane

"Now you speak of old lamps, I know not whether the Princess has taken notice of one that lies upon the cornice: whomever it belongs to, he will not be very much displeased in finding a new one instead."

Now this lamp of which the slave spoke, was the very wonderful lamp which had been the cause of Aladdin's great success.

— The Arabian Nights

The authorities of the Tate Gallery have decided to take no steps in the matter of the request from an artist, of world wide celebrity, whose painting, executed twenty years ago, now hangs in the Gallery, asking that it might be removed from public exhibition and burned. The artist wrote, asking that the picture be withdrawn from Public exhibition as being "the world's worst picture".

— Observer, October 25, 1925

I WAS listening the other day to an argument between a Writer and a Reader upon the question—has an author any right to alter his own books once they have been given to the public? The dialogue was a curious and instructive one, for the Reader was praising an early novel of the Writer's, and the Writer didn't agree. The Reader thought it was the best thing the Writer had ever done, while the Writer regarded that early book of his as a mere sowing of literary wild oats.

"It's all wrong", said the Writer: "I realize that now. I was dreadfully young when I wrote it."

"Yes", said the Reader, "it has the charm of youth."

"My dear creature, I was a mere beginner", said the Writer.

"But a beginner", said the Reader, "has a new point of view."

"The point of view of the amateur!"

"That's what I liked", said the

Reader: "I liked the style—fresh, unsophisticated—"

"Adjectival prettiness! I never look at it without wanting a blue pencil. Well, it's out of print, thank God! And when I reissue, I shall remodel the whole thing—eliminate the interminable descriptions, cut out the pages of character analysis, yes, and rewrite those ridiculous love scenes that make me blush—shorten the last scene and—"

"Ruin the book!" said the Reader. And then the row began! The Writer vowed that the book was his own book and he the final judge of it, and that, by all his gods of art, he had a right, indeed a duty, to improve the bantling by the light of his later experience, and that anyway what he did with his own property was his own business, and he would be obliged if other folk would leave him to mind it! The Reader retorted that the book in question had been his bible and his bedbook since the month it was published, and sooner than find favorite passages omitted and strange, cold, unfriendly new ones added, he would—well, he wouldn't like to say what he would do to the author. For the author, he contended, though he certainly had written it once upon a time (and many thanks, and what a genius, and all that!) had long since delivered up his rights in it to him, the Gentle Reader, to whom, with all its amazing virtues and its beloved faults, it belonged, now and forever, Amen!