

GALSWORTHY JOHN

STUDIES AND ESSAYS:
THE INN OF
TRANQUILITY, AND
OTHERS

John Galsworthy

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of Tranquility, and Others**

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"Je vous dirai que l'excès est toujours un mal."
– ANATOLE FRANCE

THE INN OF TRANQUILLITY

Under a burning blue sky, among the pine-trees and junipers, the cypresses and olives of that Odyssean coast, we came one afternoon on a pink house bearing the legend: "Osteria di Tranquillita,"; and, partly because of the name, and partly because we did not expect to find a house at all in those goat-haunted groves above the waves, we tarried for contemplation. To the familiar simplicity of that Italian building there were not lacking signs of a certain spiritual change, for out of the olive-grove which grew to its very doors a skittle-alley had been formed, and two baby cypress-trees were cut into the effigies of a cock and hen. The song of a gramophone, too, was breaking forth into the air, as it were the presiding voice of a high and cosmopolitan mind. And, lost in admiration, we became conscious of the odour of a full-flavoured cigar. Yes – in the skittle-alley a gentleman was standing who wore a bowler hat, a bright brown suit, pink tie, and very yellow boots. His head was round, his cheeks fat and well-coloured, his lips red and full under a black moustache, and he was regarding us through very thick and half-closed eyelids.

Perceiving him to be the proprietor of the high and cosmopolitan mind, we accosted him.

"Good-day!" he replied: "I spik English. Been in Amurrica yes."

"You have a lovely place here."

Sweeping a glance over the skittle-alley, he sent forth a long puff of smoke; then, turning to my companion (of the politer sex) with the air of one who has made himself perfect master of a foreign tongue, he smiled, and spoke.

"Too-quiet!"

"Precisely; the name of your inn, perhaps, suggests – "

"I change all that – soon I call it Anglo-American hotel."

"Ah! yes; you are very up-to-date already."

He closed one eye and smiled.

Having passed a few more compliments, we saluted and walked on; and, coming presently to the edge of the cliff, lay down on the thyme and the crumbled leaf-dust. All the small singing birds had long been shot and eaten; there came to us no sound but that of the waves swimming in on a gentle south wind. The wanton creatures seemed stretching out white arms to the land, flying desperately from a sea of such stupendous serenity; and over their bare shoulders their hair floated back, pale in the sunshine. If the air was void of sound, it was full of scent – that delicious and enlivening perfume of mingled gum, and herbs, and sweet wood being burned somewhere a long way off; and a silky, golden warmth slanted on to us through the olives and umbrella pines. Large wine-red violets were growing near. On such a cliff might Theocritus have lain, spinning his songs; on that divine sea Odysseus should have passed. And we felt that presently the goat-god must put his head forth from behind a rock.

It seemed a little queer that our friend in the bowler hat should move and breathe within one short flight of a cuckoo from this home of Pan. One could not but at first feelingly remember the old Boer saying: "O God, what things man sees when he goes out without a gun!" But soon the infinite incongruity of this juxtaposition began to produce within one a curious eagerness, a sort of half-philosophical delight. It began to seem too good, almost too romantic, to be true. To think of the gramophone wedded to the thin sweet singing of the olive leaves in the evening wind; to remember the scent of his rank cigar marrying with this wild incense; to read that enchanted name, "Inn of Tranquillity," and hear the bland and affable remark of the gentleman who owned it – such were, indeed, phenomena to stimulate souls to speculation. And all unconsciously one began to justify them by thoughts of the other incongruities of existence – the strange, the passionate incongruities of youth and age, wealth and poverty, life and death; the wonderful odd bedfellows of this world; all those lurid

contrasts which haunt a man's spirit till sometimes he is ready to cry out: "Rather than live where such things can be, let me die!"

Like a wild bird tracking through the air, one's meditation wandered on, following that trail of thought, till the chance encounter became spiritually luminous. That Italian gentleman of the world, with his bowler hat, his skittle-alley, his gramophone, who had planted himself down in this temple of wild harmony, was he not Progress itself – the blind figure with the stomach full of new meats and the brain of raw notions? Was he not the very embodiment of the wonderful child, Civilisation, so possessed by a new toy each day that she has no time to master its use – naive creature lost amid her own discoveries! Was he not the very symbol of that which was making economists thin, thinkers pale, artists haggard, statesmen bald – the symbol of Indigestion Incarnate! Did he not, delicious, gross, unconscious man, personify beneath his Americo-Italian polish all those rank and primitive instincts, whose satisfaction necessitated the million miseries of his fellows; all those thick rapacities which stir the hatred of the humane and thin-skinned! And yet, one's meditation could not stop there – it was not convenient to the heart!

A little above us, among the olive-trees, two blue-clothed peasants, man and woman, were gathering the fruit – from some such couple, no doubt, our friend in the bowler hat had sprung; more "virile" and adventurous than his brothers, he had not stayed in the home groves, but had gone forth to drink the waters of hustle and commerce, and come back – what he was. And he, in turn, would beget children, and having made his pile out of his 'Anglo-American hotel' would place those children beyond the coarser influences of life, till they became, perhaps, even as our selves, the salt of the earth, and despised him. And I thought: "I do not despise those peasants – far from it. I do not despise myself – no more than reason; why, then, despise my friend in the bowler hat, who is, after all, but the necessary link between them and me?" I did not despise the olive-trees, the warm sun, the pine scent, all those material things which had made him so thick and strong; I did not despise the golden, tenuous imaginings which the trees and rocks and sea were starting in my own spirit. Why, then, despise the skittle-alley, the gramophone, those expressions of the spirit of my friend in the billy-cock hat? To despise them was ridiculous!

And suddenly I was visited by a sensation only to be described as a sort of smiling certainty, emanating from, and, as it were, still tingling within every nerve of myself, but yet vibrating harmoniously with the world around. It was as if I had suddenly seen what was the truth of things; not perhaps to anybody else, but at all events to me. And I felt at once tranquil and elated, as when something is met with which rouses and fascinates in a man all his faculties.

"For," I thought, "if it is ridiculous in me to despise my friend – that perfect marvel of disharmony – it is ridiculous in me to despise anything. If he is a little bit of continuity, as perfectly logical an expression of a necessary phase or mood of existence as I myself am, then, surely, there is nothing in all the world that is not a little bit of continuity, the expression of a little necessary mood. Yes," I thought, "he and I, and those olive-trees, and this spider on my hand, and everything in the Universe which has an individual shape, are all fit expressions of the separate moods of a great underlying Mood or Principle, which must be perfectly adjusted, volving and revolving on itself. For if It did not volve and revolve on Itself, It would peter out at one end or the other, and the image of this petering out no man with his mental apparatus can conceive. Therefore, one must conclude It to be perfectly adjusted and everlasting. But if It is perfectly adjusted and everlasting, we are all little bits of continuity, and if we are all little bits of continuity it is ridiculous for one of us to despise another. So," I thought, "I have now proved it from my friend in the billy-cock hat up to the Universe, and from the Universe down, back again to my friend."

And I lay on my back and looked at the sky. It seemed friendly to my thought with its smile, and few white clouds, saffron-tinged like the plumes of a white duck in sunlight. "And yet," I wondered, "though my friend and I may be equally necessary, I am certainly irritated by him, and shall as certainly continue to be irritated, not only by him, but by a thousand other men and so, with a light

heart, you may go on being irritated with your friend in the bowler hat, you may go on loving those peasants and this sky and sea. But, since you have this theory of life, you may not despise any one or any thing, not even a skittle-alley, for they are all threaded to you, and to despise them would be to blaspheme against continuity, and to blaspheme against continuity would be to deny Eternity. Love you cannot help, and hate you cannot help; but contempt is – for you – the sovereign idiocy, the irreligious fancy!"

There was a bee weighing down a blossom of thyme close by, and underneath the stalk a very ugly little centipede. The wild bee, with his little dark body and his busy bear's legs, was lovely to me, and the creepy centipede gave me shudderings; but it was a pleasant thing to feel so sure that he, no less than the bee, was a little mood expressing himself out in harmony with Designs tiny thread on the miraculous quilt. And I looked at him with a sudden zest and curiosity; it seemed to me that in the mystery of his queer little creepings I was enjoying the Supreme Mystery; and I thought: "If I knew all about that wriggling beast, then, indeed, I might despise him; but, truly, if I knew all about him I should know all about everything – Mystery would be gone, and I could not bear to live!"

So I stirred him with my finger and he went away.

"But how" – I thought "about such as do not feel it ridiculous to despise; how about those whose temperaments and religions show them all things so plainly that they know they are right and others wrong? They must be in a bad way!" And for some seconds I felt sorry for them, and was discouraged. But then I thought: "Not at all – obviously not! For if they do not find it ridiculous to feel contempt, they are perfectly right to feel contempt, it being natural to them; and you have no business to be sorry for them, for that is, after all, only your euphemism for contempt. They are all right, being the expressions of contemptuous moods, having religions and so forth, suitable to these moods; and the religion of your mood would be Greek to them, and probably a matter for contempt. But this only makes it the more interesting. For though to you, for instance, it may seem impossible to worship Mystery with one lobe of the brain, and with the other to explain it, the thought that this may not seem impossible to others should not discourage you; it is but another little piece of that Mystery which makes life so wonderful and sweet."

The sun, fallen now almost to the level of the cliff, was slanting upward on to the burnt-red pine boughs, which had taken to themselves a quaint resemblance to the great brown limbs of the wild men Titian drew in his pagan pictures, and down below us the sea-nymphs, still swimming to shore, seemed eager to embrace them in the enchanted groves. All was fused in that golden glow of the sun going down-sea and land gathered into one transcendent mood of light and colour, as if Mystery desired to bless us by showing how perfect was that worshipful adjustment, whose secret we could never know. And I said to myself: "None of those thoughts of yours are new, and in a vague way even you have thought them before; but all the same, they have given you some little feeling of tranquillity."

And at that word of fear I rose and invited my companion to return toward the town. But as we stealthily crept by the "Osteria di Tranquillita," our friend in the bowler hat came out with a gun over his shoulder and waved his hand toward the Inn.

"You come again in two week – I change all that! And now," he added, "I go to shoot little bird or two," and he disappeared into the golden haze under the olive-trees.

A minute later we heard his gun go off, and returned homeward with a prayer.

1910.

MAGPIE OVER THE HILL

I lay often that summer on a slope of sand and coarse grass, close to the Cornish sea, trying to catch thoughts; and I was trying very hard when I saw them coming hand in hand.

She was dressed in blue linen, and a little cloud of honey-coloured hair; her small face had serious eyes the colour of the chicory flowers she was holding up to sniff at – a clean sober little maid, with a very touching upward look of trust. Her companion was a strong, active boy of perhaps fourteen, and he, too, was serious – his deep-set, blacklashed eyes looked down at her with a queer protective wonder; the while he explained in a soft voice broken up between two ages, that exact process which bees adopt to draw honey out of flowers. Once or twice this hoarse but charming voice became quite fervent, when she had evidently failed to follow; it was as if he would have been impatient, only he knew he must not, because she was a lady and younger than himself, and he loved her.

They sat down just below my nook, and began to count the petals of a chicory flower, and slowly she nestled in to him, and he put his arm round her. Never did I see such sedate, sweet loving, so trusting on her part, so guardianlike on his. They were like, in miniature – though more dewy, – those sober couples who have long lived together, yet whom one still catches looking at each other with confidential tenderness, and in whom, one feels, passion is atrophied from never having been in use.

Long I sat watching them in their cool communion, half-embraced, talking a little, smiling a little, never once kissing. They did not seem shy of that; it was rather as if they were too much each other's to think of such a thing. And then her head slid lower and lower down his shoulder, and sleep buttoned the lids over those chicory-blue eyes. How careful he was, then, not to wake her, though I could see his arm was getting stiff! He still sat, good as gold, holding her, till it began quite to hurt me to see his shoulder thus in chancery. But presently I saw him draw his arm away ever so carefully, lay her head down on the grass, and lean forward to stare at something. Straight in front of them was a magpie, balancing itself on a stripped twig of thorn-tree. The agitating bird, painted of night and day, was making a queer noise and flirting one wing, as if trying to attract attention. Rising from the twig, it circled, vivid and stealthy, twice round the tree, and flew to another a dozen paces off. The boy rose; he looked at his little mate, looked at the bird, and began quietly to move toward it; but uttering again its queer call, the bird glided on to a third thorn-tree. The boy hesitated then – but once more the bird flew on, and suddenly dipped over the hill. I saw the boy break into a run; and getting up quickly, I ran too.

When I reached the crest there was the black and white bird flying low into a dell, and there the boy, with hair streaming back, was rushing helter-skelter down the hill. He reached the bottom and vanished into the dell. I, too, ran down the hill. For all that I was prying and must not be seen by bird or boy, I crept warily in among the trees to the edge of a pool that could know but little sunlight, so thickly arched was it by willows, birch-trees, and wild hazel. There, in a swing of boughs above the water, was perched no pied bird, but a young, dark-haired girl with, dangling, bare, brown legs. And on the brink of the black water goldened, with fallen leaves, the boy was crouching, gazing up at her with all his soul. She swung just out of reach and looked down at him across the pool. How old was she, with her brown limbs, and her gleaming, slanting eyes? Or was she only the spirit of the dell, this elf-thing swinging there, entwined with boughs and the dark water, and covered with a shift of wet birch leaves. So strange a face she had, wild, almost wicked, yet so tender; a face that I could not take my eyes from. Her bare toes just touched the pool, and flicked up drops of water that fell on the boy's face.

From him all the sober steadfastness was gone; already he looked as wild as she, and his arms were stretched out trying to reach her feet. I wanted to cry to him: "Go back, boy, go back!" but could not; her elf eyes held me dumb-they looked so lost in their tender wildness.

And then my heart stood still, for he had slipped and was struggling in deep water beneath her feet. What a gaze was that he was turning up to her – not frightened, but so longing, so desperate; and hers how triumphant, and how happy!

And then he clutched her foot, and clung, and climbed; and bending down, she drew him up to her, all wet, and clasped him in the swing of boughs.

I took a long breath then. An orange gleam of sunlight had flamed in among the shadows and fell round those two where they swung over the dark water, with lips close together and spirits lost in one another's, and in their eyes such drowning ecstasy! And then they kissed! All round me pool, and leaves, and air seemed suddenly to swirl and melt – I could see nothing plain!.. What time passed – I do not know – before their faces slowly again became visible! His face the sober boy's – was turned away from her, and he was listening; for above the whispering of leaves a sound of weeping came from over the hill. It was to that he listened.

And even as I looked he slid down from out of her arms; back into the pool, and began struggling to gain the edge. What grief and longing in her wild face then! But she did not wail. She did not try to pull him back; that elfish heart of dignity could reach out to what was coming, it could not drag at what was gone. Unmoving as the boughs and water, she watched him abandon her.

Slowly the struggling boy gained land, and lay there, breathless. And still that sound of lonely weeping came from over the hill.

Listening, but looking at those wild, mourning eyes that never moved from him, he lay. Once he turned back toward the water, but fire had died within him; his hands dropped, nerveless – his young face was all bewilderment.

And the quiet darkness of the pool waited, and the trees, and those lost eyes of hers, and my heart. And ever from over the hill came the little fair maiden's lonely weeping.

Then, slowly dragging his feet, stumbling, half-blinded, turning and turning to look back, the boy groped his way out through the trees toward that sound; and, as he went, that dark spirit-elf, abandoned, clasping her own lithe body with her arms, never moved her gaze from him.

I, too, crept away, and when I was safe outside in the pale evening sunlight, peered back into the dell. There under the dark trees she was no longer, but round and round that cage of passion, fluttering and wailing through the leaves, over the black water, was the magpie, flighting on its twilight wings.

I turned and ran and ran till I came over the hill and saw the boy and the little fair, sober maiden sitting together once more on the open slope, under the high blue heaven. She was nestling her tear-stained face against his shoulder and speaking already of indifferent things. And he – he was holding her with his arm and watching over her with eyes that seemed to see something else.

And so I lay, hearing their sober talk and gazing at their sober little figures, till I awoke and knew I had dreamed all that little allegory of sacred and profane love, and from it had returned to reason, knowing no more than ever which was which. 1912.

SHEEP-SHEARING

From early morning there had been bleating of sheep in the yard, so that one knew the creatures were being sheared, and toward evening I went along to see. Thirty or forty naked-looking ghosts of sheep were penned against the barn, and perhaps a dozen still inhabiting their coats. Into the wool of one of these bulky ewes the farmer's small, yellow-haired daughter was twisting her fist, hustling it toward Fate; though pulled almost off her feet by the frightened, stubborn creature, she never let go, till, with a despairing cough, the ewe had passed over the threshold and was fast in the hands of a shearer. At the far end of the barn, close by the doors, I stood a minute or two before shifting up to watch the shearing. Into that dim, beautiful home of age, with its great rafters and mellow stone archways, the June sunlight shone through loopholes and chinks, in thin glamour, powdering with its very strangeness the dark cathedraled air, where, high up, clung a fog of old grey cobwebs so thick as ever were the stalactites of a huge cave. At this end the scent of sheep and wool and men had not yet routed that home essence of the barn, like the savour of acorns and withering beech leaves.

They were shearing by hand this year, nine of them, counting the postman, who, though farm-bred, "did'n putt much to the shearin'," but had come to round the sheep up and give general aid.

Sitting on the creatures, or with a leg firmly crooked over their heads, each shearer, even the two boys, had an air of going at it in his own way. In their white canvas shearing suits they worked very steadily, almost in silence, as if drowsed by the "click-clip, click-clip" of the shears. And the sheep, but for an occasional wriggle of legs or head, lay quiet enough, having an inborn sense perhaps of the fitness of things, even when, once in a way, they lost more than wool; glad too, mayhap, to be rid of their matted vestments. From time to time the little damsel offered each shearer a jug and glass, but no man drank till he had finished his sheep; then he would get up, stretch his cramped muscles, drink deep, and almost instantly sit down again on a fresh beast. And always there was the buzz of flies swarming in the sunlight of the open doorway, the dry rustle of the pollarded lime-trees in the sharp wind outside, the bleating of some released ewe, upset at her own nakedness, the scrape and shuffle of heels and sheep's limbs on the floor, together with the "click-clip, click-clip" of the shears.

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