

A Silent Sinner

By Willis D. Jacobs

ONE of his friends called him a "drifting, silent man, full of hidden passion," and a photograph taken two years before his death — taken the year that sent his name, both a reviled and a lauded thing, around the world — shows a tight mouth, a grave face. There is something fantastic about the face, too, with its shock of thick black hair, the full dark mustache, and quiet, pain-filled eyes. The man was dying already, as the picture shows.

So it was all for the worst that Synge attended the play that night. He had written it, he wrote "again and again — thirteen times," and nothing, not even his usual nervousness at a first night, could keep him away. It was pandemonium he saw, not his play, for the town was Dublin, the year was 1907, the play was *The Playboy of the Western World*, and the Irish people were resolved to destroy forever this man John Millington Synge and his insults of the Irish citizenry. They knew his work from before — hadn't they hissed a work of his into silence four years earlier, hadn't they shouted down another play of his just two

years before, hadn't they prevented even the showing of still another play of his? Now they sat restive while on the boards of the Abbey Theater the first few lines of his *Playboy* were spoken. It was the gathering of a storm, a hurricane that broke when one of the characters used words outraging all traditions of modest speech.

Lady Gregory, friend and protector of Synge, saw a group of men sitting ominously together, and Synge himself had to telephone for the police. It was no use: the audience was out for blood. In the middle of the first act, horns tooted and shouts were howled. Not a word on the stage could be heard; the actors continued in dumb show. No word, in fact, of the three-act play was heard after the first ten minutes. Scuffles stirred the audience, roars of defiance were bellowed, and Synge, listening to it all, had to carry out the body of one of his defenders.

Every night for a week the tin trumpets blew, shouts were hurled at the actors and the theater threatened. Every night the police carted

off demonstrators to court. Meanwhile, what of the author? It helped kill him, Lady Gregory later wrote; and in justification she took the play to the United States two years after Synge died in 1909. There its fate was curiously like its fate in Dublin. "In New York," said Yeats, "a currant cake and a watch were flung, the owner of the watch claiming it at the stage door afterwards." The actors were arrested in Philadelphia. Only the personal intercession of President Theodore Roosevelt saved the troupe.

And, after all, what was so outrageous about *The Playboy of the Western World*? No one today knows for sure, not even the Dublin audiences, where the play is now produced from year to year. In the year 1907, however, Ireland knew. What was wrong was the theme, the subject of the play. For here was a play declaring that an Irish country town would condone a parricide, would defend and extoll a son who murdered his father.

Perhaps, as his friend suggested, the riot helped kill John Synge. One other thing it did, though. The Abbey audience had rioted so violently against the play that audience, theater, play and playwright were heard around the world.

It was almost too late for Synge. He was only thirty-six years old, but for years he had wandered about Europe, often in half-starvation, traveling third-class or by foot, playing his fiddle to farmers as he

sat by their cottages or walked with them on the road. He visited the bleak Aran Islands shivering in the long winds between Ireland and Newfoundland, listening "like a hare in a gap" to the native speech, sitting in the kitchens of the people, hearing with deep sympathy and curious detachment the tales of dead folk and dead happenings. When Synge died at 38, he had written but six plays, all short. It is a small niche in literature that he carved, but he carved it high.

ALL IRELAND KNOWS it now, as a certain few in Ireland knew it in his time. If only the Abbey audience had listened! For they would have heard, among much else, a love scene clothed in perilous beauty, spoken in a language delicate, passionate, and deeply Irish, the stars of heaven singing with the words.

Yet the richest lines are in Synge's last play, the beautiful *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the most intense and human play of our century. Pure poetry clothes it; the mist of tragic life curls about it. But Synge never saw it. In the early morning of March 24, 1909, John Synge said wearily to the nurse, "It is no use fighting death any longer," and turned over and died. He had already written an epitaph:

A silent sinner, nights and days,
No human heart to him drew nigh;
Alone he wound his wonted ways,
Alone and little loved did die.