CHAPTER III

"THE MELEE OF CLASS STRUGGLE":

DAYS TO COME
HEILMAN'S second play, *Days to Come* (1936), like *The Children's Hour*, deals with the theme of 'good and evil.' As in *The Children's Hour*, the harm is done not by a 'villain,' but by well-intentioned, self-deluded people. As Hellman herself clearly states, "evil this time, is in the hands of people who don't understand it."¹ The play revolves around the lives of several people involved in a labour strike at a small Ohio factory. Hellman offers two theses in the play - first, the antagonists in the class struggle were moving farther and farther apart, and second, the belief that capitalism needed the support of brutal fascism.

From this it is clear that Hellman, like Sidney Kingsley, moves leftward with *Days to Come*. The play deals with labour strife which results in strike-breaking and presents labour as the moral victor. It is built on the theme of labour unionization like Clifford Odets' *Waiting For Lefty*. Hellman attempts to incorporate various themes regarding the evolving character of labour unions and the conflicts between members of a family. As D.V.Falk rightly observes, *Days to Come* is "a brief foray into the melee of class struggle."²

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¹ Lillian Hellman, "Introduction," to *Four Plays* (Randon House, 1942), p.II.
However, as the labour cause is not enough to unify the action, Hellman explores the individual characters who are more often than not confused about their own motives. She presents a family of more or less well-intentioned Americans confronted by the problem of dealing with organised labour when their employees undertake a strike. As Hellman herself puts it, *Days to Come* is

a story of innocent people on both sides who are drawn into conflict and events far beyond their comprehension. It's the saga of a man who started something he cannot stop, a parallel among adults to what I did with children in *The Children's Hour.*

Though the play is chiefly concerned with labour unionization, it is not conceived in the simple realism of Sklar, Maltz or even Galsworthy, but is interwoven with the complicated, neurotic lives of the industrialists themselves. It is rather an illumination of the forces from which strikes grow than a bare socio-economic photography.

*Days to Come* is set in a small town in Ohio in which workers are reluctantly striking against their paternalistic employer, Andrew Rodman, who is a part owner of a brush factory, a family business inherited from his father. Hard times have forced Rodman to cut the workers' wages below the poverty level. Some of the less paternalistic stock-holders—Henry Ellicott, the family lawyer, and Rodman's sister,

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Cora - have persuaded Rodman to break the strike by importing professional strikebreakers, Wilkie, Mossie and Joe, who are mobsters and jailbirds.

The union organizer, Leo Whalen, warns his men not to allow themselves to be provoked by the strike-breakers into rioting or other violence. This results in a long stand-off. One of the strike-breakers, Mossie, is killed by Joe in a gambling quarrel and the gang leader, Wilkie, plants the dead body at Union Headquarters. The workers, and especially Whalen, are made to look guilty of the murder. Whalen is arrested. And a pretext is established for the strikebreakers to attack the workers.

In the ensuing violence, the child of the foreman, Firth, an old friend of Rodman family, is killed. The town is torn apart with shooting. The workers are hungry and tired, and so they agree to call off the strike. Julie Rodman, Andrew’s wife, provides an alibi that Whalen is innocent of murder, as she herself was present in his quarters, when the corpse was placed near his house by Wilkie. Whalen is released and the workers go back to work. Whalen gives up the attempt to organize a union. Although Andrew Roadman, succeeds in breaking the strike, his family life is wrecked. He suffers not only from the social tragedy of this bloodshed, but also from the personal tragedy of his wife’s infidelities. At the end, there is a new kind of awareness between Andrew and his wife.
In Days to Come, as in The Searching Wind, the public and private realms are meant to illustrate each other. The upper-middle class characters mess up their domestic lives with the same disregard for hard reality which they have for social and political questions. Dependent on an ample and secure income, undisturbed by and largely ignorant of the world around them, members of this class exist in unquestioned comfort till the foundations of their economic support are threatened. Then the nullity of their inner lives, the lack of genuine values of mind or spirit grow frighteningly clear, bewildering and oppressive to them, though possibly liberating to a few. They are adrift in an empty universe, provoking a psychological chaos in which, whether they are of good or destructive nature, they must necessarily behave like fools or knaves. They are autonomous of a society which they have never really examined or understood. They barely recognize their own identity. They become a citizenry of the maimed.

Hellman, being an observer and a philosopher, as well as a special pleader, knows well that in the ranks of each of the opposing forces there are those who are neither villains nor heroes. And she has been at pains to show some man or woman who has been victimized like Andrew Rodman, by the circumstances, is worth to be saved like Alexandra in The Little Foxes.

At the end of the play, Andrew Rodman, orders the gangsters out from his house and realizes that it is no longer safe to move out. It is important to note that
Andrew is a businessman who is not an exploiter, and that the workers also have a cause. Only the mediators are villainous. The play's message is ambivalent in the sense that while creating a genial industrialist and genuine workers, the blame is shifted on to the mediators. But the questions of the mediators exploiting the situation in itself, as the play suggests, is created by capitalist economy. One cannot break strikes without hurting someone. There is truth in Wilkie's comments:

But I want to tell you, I've worked for a lot of men, some of them deacons of the Church who were breaking strikes for the good of America, but I never worked for a man before who believed I could come in, run his factory, and break his strike, without walking on anybody's toes.4

The plot construction of Days to Come is met with criticism and especially most critics find it faulty in the third act as in the case of the The Children's Hour. The action of the play starts in the first act, with the strikebreakers entering Rodman's House. The action rises in the second act when one of the trouble creators is killed by his own man. Hellman seems to fall back on a melodramatic intrigue for the climax, allowing the denouement to hinge on an attempt to frame the organizer, Whalen, on a charge of murder. The play reaches the climax when the dead body of Mossie is left at the union leader's house. However, the catastrophe occurs when

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All further references are to this edition, and page numbers are given parenthetically at the end of the quotations.
Rodman's wife, Julie, provides an alibi to release Whalen and confesses to her husband her illicit relationship with Ellicott and Whalen.

The most criticized element of the plot of Days to Come is the thread of the wife's love for the labour organizer and the most critized scene is that in which she confesses her feelings to Whalen. For instance, Barret H.Clark thinks that "the introduction of a love scene at the climax of the action, no matter what it is intended to do, blurs the outline of the story and obscures the theme."5 Another critic, Katherine, says that "although Hellman said the play was about individuals, most critics felt that the strike was the story and saw no connection between the strike and the revelation of the personal lives of the characters."6 There are other critics who even find fault with the plot structure as a whole. For example, Harold Clurman writes that "the play's flaw is that its plot does not wholly convey its intended meaning or creative impulse."7 Bigsby also is of the view that "the weakness of the play is that this moral tale is contained within the pieties of a sub-genre-the strike play—which Hellman handled with less assurance... she was simultaneously writing two distinct plays. The two proved incompatible."8 Doris.V.Falk too feels that "The plot

of the play, as a whole, is as abortive as Whalen’s efforts. It is crowded with loosely related elements including blackmail, adultery and broadly satirical sketches of the rich. "David Sievers says that "the play is strange and jerky in its construction." G.J. Gould, opines that "the play is too complex and poorly structured."  

While these various attacks from different critics against the plot construction of *Days to Come* as ‘abortive’, jerky and poorly structured, cannot be dismissed as baseless, it is to be remembered that this is due to the very nature of the play itself. Though *The Children’s Hour* deals with the same theme of the war between forces of good and evil, its plot is tightly constructed because of the factor that evil clearly emerges as the victor. But, inasmuch as *Days to Come* is about evil ‘in the hands of those who don’t understand it’ and since, in Hellman’s scheme ignorance is no excuse, a play based on this proposition is bound to be comparatively discursive and undramatic. As a passage in *The Bible* read:

> For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever: seeing that which is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool. (‘Ecclesiastes’ 2:16)

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from which the title of the play is derived indicates the forces of good have no
direction except muddle and neglect. And the only reward of such failure is a dim
self-insight when it is too late to reform.

It is also to be noted that while such things as infidelity are "always happening
in life and spoiling the pattern which tidy-minded artists must weave to make
themselves articulate, they are too likely to lead us into bypaths, away from the main
issue." It is, perhaps, for this reason and also because of Hellman's desire to find
'new ways to say' what she has to say that she feels impelled to pull together the
threads of her arguments in the last scene resulting in chaotic construction.

The point is that in constructing the play Hellman draws obviously more on
her own feelings as a moralist than on her artistic obligations as a dramatic artist. She
seemed to be aware of this artistic immaturity at the beginning stage of her dramatic
career. This is made clear to us from her memoirs when she says:

I am a learner, not a teacher and I need a cool teacher.

This is driven home to us further by her own response to the criticism levelled
against the poorly constructed plot of Days to Come in her "Introduction to Four

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plays." Heilman says how she had made the conventional mistake of trying to pack everything she knew into the play:

I returned to the amateur's mistake. Everything you think and feel must be written this time, because you may never have another chance to write it... I wanted to say too much. And I began thinking of new ways to say it. People in life, I told myself, don't always make the direct answer, or follow the immediately preceding thought... I played this theme all alone. A solitary composer with a not very interesting quarter note. The subtleties of failures are seldom discovered and that is just as well.14

Like the plot-construction, Heilman's art of characterization, in Days to Come has come in for a good deal of criticism. It is generally believed that the play lacks focus and depth of characterization. The characters, though vigorously committed to their beliefs, seem to be bound by the playwright's harness rather than their own.

Here, it is important to note that the characters in Days to Come are different people, in quite different situations. As the play is about a strike in a 'model' town, its characters are a confused array of employers -- Andrew Rodman and Henry Willicott -- of idle neurotic women -- Julie Rodman and Cora Rodman-- of strike leaders -- Whalen --- of workers -- Firth --- of strike breakers --- Wilkie. Mossie and Joe. What is more, the characters stand by and allow the despoilers to accomplish their destructive aims. Often these bystanders may be the victims of their own naivete

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or lack of self-knowledge. Hellman has placed her characters in a nightmarish situation, a refining fire to test their integrity.

Andrew Rodman is a kind and decent factory owner in a town where he has known most of his workers and their families all his life. In him we have a portrait of a naively docile workman and a knowing and effective labour leader. He is an idealist who is on the verge of bankruptcy because he plays a good Samaritan to his wife's family. He has many virtues -- love for his men, love for his wife, love for his town and love for his business. He, therefore, pays for loving all of them neither wisely nor well. Rodman sounds like a gentleman farmer when he speaks of his love for his town and for his men, but the gentleman farmer never understood the peasant any more than the industrialist on the hill understood the workers in the valley.

Rodman clings to the liberal virtues, but does so in an abstract way, protected by his money from the harsh casualties of life. As he belatedly realises, he has been "the delicate prince in his ivory tower, carefully protected from the dust and din of battle."\(^{15}\) His liberal vacillation has been the cause of the collapse of the world he fondly imagines himself to inhabit. As a benevolent manufacturer and reluctant oppressor Rodman turns out to be a well-meaning but unbelievably naive cuckold. As a humanitarian businessman who might have ingratiated himself, he is caught between

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\(^{15}\) C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*, p.278.
a venal partner and an unfaithful wife. All the same, he is so broken up over the 
death of a striker's child that his wife's infidelity is only secondary to him.

Thus, Andrew Rodman comes to us as a victim of the brutalities of the system 
which he hopes to humanise. He is a spoiled priest, who believes that the world could 
be sustained by his own moral imagination, and he could play the game of wealth 
without being corrupted, and that his wife's desperate sense of alienation could be 
controlled by his own sense of moral purpose. In the words of Bigsby, "the 
inadequacy of such a stance, the incubus of anarchy concealed beneath apparent order, 
is symbolized here, as in Fitzgerald's book, by the wife's adultery. And he is left at 
the end of the play discarded by history, and displaced from the comfortable world 
he had imagined himself to inhabit, like Fitzgerald's Dick Diver."16

Julie, Andrew Rodman's wife, is an interesting character. She contracts a 
loveless marriage and drifts aimlessly, indulging in extramarital affairs because she 
inhabits a world with no values of any kind. Being a member of the ruling class and 
bored by the dull town and loveless marriage, Julie becomes wilfully unfaithful with 
a variety of men. She has an affair with Andrew's business partner, Henry Ellicott. 
She meets the Union leader, Whalen, and falls in love with him also. With her

16 C.W.E.Bigsby, Ibid., pp.278-279.
insatiable drive and her restless seeking for sensation, she seems to be "Hedda Gabler without even the compassion that Ibsen evokes for his neurotic heroine."17

However, Julie Rodman need not be dismissed wholly as an unfaithful wife. She is not the bored aristocrat, slumming with a labour organizer, because she is a closet socialist. She believes that there are people who learn from others and that she is a constant learner. This is made clear when she says to Whalen:

When I was young, I guess I was looking for something I could do. Then for something I could be. Finally, just for something to want, or to think or to believe in. I always wanted somebody to show me the way....I decided long time ago that there were people who had to learn from other people. I'm one of them. (111)

We may say that it is with these two characters --- Andrew and Julie Rodman--- that the play rises momentarily above the conventionalities of the strike drama. Their failure in their lives is not a sudden failure of will and imagination. Hellman’s point is that it is a self-deceit of long standing which has merely been exposed by the brutal realities of the 1930s. "Neither Andrew nor his wife has been in touch with the real world at any time in their lives. Born to wealth, they have been disabled by the presumptions of power, but also by the empty posturings of a decade in which morality was conceived as a private testing of the sensibility or that pursuit of the ineffable ideal, with its underside of self-deceiving or corrupting violence, which Fitzgerald had described in The Great Gatsby." 18

17 David Sievers, Freud on Broadway, p.281.
18 C.W.E.Bigsby, A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, p.278.
Cora, Andrew's sister, falls a total contrast to him. In the figure of Cora, Hellman offers a version of Regina in *The Little Foxes* and a reprise of the self-concerned aunt in *The Children's Hour*, her first play. Cora is a woman for whom self is the central and motivating force. She is unmarried and the co-owner of the factory and is portrayed as a frustrated spinster and as a caricature of the snobbish, greedy, idle rich. She is a pathetic, psychosomatic woman who acts like a child fussing with the servants, hating her brother's wife with an incestuous jealousy and knowing so little of sex that she thinks Caesarian operations are when the woman is under age. Hellman says in her *Introduction to Four Plays* that she 'hates a woman like Cora'.

Whalen, the labour organizer, is the first of the few Hellman 'heroes.' He is one of the characters who compels Hellman's respect as a man 'who works for other men.' He is an intelligent and courageous union leader. As Timothy J Wiles notices, 'Hellman places the vision in the eyes of Whalen's character, looking to it in the future.' The faithful worker Firth, reminds us of the feudal loyalty of Chekhov's Firs. He is a noble workman whose child is killed by the vicious strike-breakers.

Among the vicious characters --- Henry Ellicott Wilkie, Mossie and Joe --- Henry Ellicott is the corrupt and scheming lawyer, the single-mindedly grasping

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capitalist shareholder of the factory. He is Julie's ex-lover and the foxiest of little foxes. And Wilkie, Mossie and Joe are strike-breakers who are imported by the manipulation of Ellicott to create violence in Ohio. They are atypical thugs and they are restless because they are not able to make a massacre for which they have been trained. Their restlessness creates an unhealthy tension that leads one of them to kill Mossie.

All these characters, good or bad, however ingeniously sketched, are ineffectual. And their efforts, along with the plot, just peter out. The hired thugs - Wilkie and Joe - accomplish the villainous purpose for which they are finally paid and leave town. The strike as well as the unionization fail, the company would probably go broke and the marriage of the well-meaning Rodman is bankrupt. Julie's adulterous affair with Ellicott has gone sour, and her mawkish attraction to Whalen comes to nothing. For Julie, it is too late, and her impulse to find a better way of life has been too long delayed. Nothing can be expected from Henry Ellicott who brings in the strikebreakers. Obviously he is only a stupid, unimaginative and well-intentioned bungler. And, as for Cora, she remains a lay figure, the symbol of all that was blind and cruel among the economic royalists who produced her. The workers have gone back to their tedious, under-paid jobs, and the Rodmans go back to their strenuous, trapped, unsatisfying lives.
In spite of its lapses in plot - construction and characterization, *Days to Come*, like any other play of Hellman, holds up a mirror to the contemporary issues and is always praised for its realistic nature. The play is a result of Hellman’s sincere effort to dramatise immediate social forces. The script is of interest to the student of Hellman’s work because of her attempt to enlarge the boundaries of the realistic play. "She gathered information from newspapers, special reports, political discussions, meetings that were prevalent at the time."20

In contrast to *The Children’s Hour*, *Days to Come* has obvious contemporary meaning. As the play reveals, it is naive to imagine that one can break a strike without violence. Also, the discussion about the domestic difficulties that mirror the social problems trivialises them. As Bigsby observes, "certainly Lillian Hellman’s moral concerns are obscured by a more immediate social imperative, while its characters stand as a simple concession to the conventionalities of the committed theatre."21 Hellman, herself confesses this social implication in her play:

It is crowded and overwrought, but it is a good report of rich liberals in 1930s, of a labour leader who saw through them, of a modern lost lady, and has in it a correct prediction of how conservative the American labour movement was to become.22

Moreover, the characters in the play are based on real people. This is made clear to us by Hellman herself in her *Introduction to the Four Plays*:

I knew a woman like Cora and I hated her, and that hate had to go in the play. I knew a woman like Julie, I pitied her, and that pity had to go in the play. I had been raised with the Ellicotts of the world and what I felt about them had to go in the play, too. I knew Leo Whalen and I wanted to say how much I respected men who work for other men.23

Although in *Days to Come* irony is sparingly used when compared to the rest of her plays, still one can see the ‘boomerang irony’ in the plot. In emphasizing the fact that ignorance, dishonesty and cowardice in personal lives affect social events, Hellman, makes use of ‘boomerang irony.’ If the factory owner and his wife had understood their own motives, had been honest in their marriage, then he would not have been in the financial clutches of the lawyer and would not have been forced to call in the strikebreakers. If the owner’s sister had not been selfish and greedy, Rodman could have used money instead of borrowing from the lawyer. Thus, the mistakes of the main characters turn out on them and in turn bring their ineffectual lives.

One should not fail to note that Hellman, in *Days to Come*, is attempting a technique which she later mastered in *The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic*, attempting to show more sides of a character than the drama normally reveals. Several

23 Lillian Hellman, *An Introduction to Four Plays*, p.II.

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reviewers called the play novelistic. Hellman has always insisted that "she has been influenced by novelists, such as Henry James, Stendhal and Dickens, rather than by dramatists."24

As usual, Hellman is charged of writing in *Days to Come* a melodrama including murder, attempted frame-up, coincidence, attempted blackmail and secrets. Falk writes: "*Days to Come*, however, took Hellman's characteristic form - realistic melodrama."25 Leonard Ungar also is of the view that Hellman "unable to write tragedy and unwilling to settle for melodrama, she writes both: a tragedy in a melodramatic setting where an individual brings ruin on himself and others because he does not understand the nature of man."26

But, one should understand that these are the melodramatic trappings typical of too many plays of the 1930s. They are not false. All this is only representative of what was or had been happening in the earlier days of the period.

It is interesting to note that *Days to Come* is a harbinger of Hellman plays to come. In *The Searching Wind*, *The Autumn Garden* and *Toys in the Attic*, Hellman


25 Doris.V.Falk *Lillian Hellman*, p.46.

is looking at the Rodmans of the world - the ineffectual ones who let evil and decay
attack and destroy the lives of others, as it consumes their own vitality. Though
flawed and tantalizing in the sketchy glimpses of the Rodmans it gives us, *Days to
Come* is an interesting play. Drama Critic, John Gassner, looking back in the 1940's
feels that "*Days to Come* deserves better of New York than the fate it received."\(^{27}\)
Joseph Wood Krutch and Alexander Taylor were among the few who praise Hellman’s
attempt to expand her dramatic canvas. Also, Krutch recognized the Hellman of *Days
to Come* "as an heir to the playwright August Strindberg."\(^{28}\)

*Days to Come* illustrates the fusion of socio-economic themes with
psychoanalytic treatment of motives in this post-Freudian period. Hellman, a better
playwright than propagandist, seems more intent on probing the psyches and souls of
stupid capitalists than on preaching the thesis or on summoning the workers to
revolution.

The main significance of *Days to Come* lies in its largest defect. As Clurman
puts it, "Hellman has certainly written better plays than *Days to Come* yet I found it
interesting for a variety of reasons even for its faults. The play takes on a measure of
dignity a promise that greater technical assurance through further practice will give


Heilman*, p.11.
Heilman, her individual tone." Although Heilman lacked the knowledge and social awareness required to write a protest drama, of the working class pitted against its decadent and corrupt oppressors, the play does, especially in the last act, begin to indicate her understanding of the personal conflicts of the middle class family.

However confused and diffuse the total affect, Days to Come has many qualities of her first and of her later plays. Shifting tensions permeate the atmosphere. We sense the unresolved discords, the sultry hates and murderous impulses that lie below the surface. The utterances may often be quiet and decorous, yet there is a burning intensity behind them. From the anger and hatred she exhibited in The Children's Hour against the Tilfords and the furious, underlying evil she shows to be present in the Rodman family in Days to Come, she is moulding another attempt to bring the form of social drama to bear on the plight of the middle class.

Indeed, Days to Come is a play best seen in the context of a book like Tender is the Night rather than in that provided by the strike plays blossoming in the American theatre of the time. However, it is interesting to conclude with Heilman's words on the play:

But with all that is wrong, all the confusion, the jumble, the attempt to do too much, I stand on the side of Days to Come. I am only sorry that the confusion in the script confused the best director in the theatre. 