

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

“A Good Man Fallen Among Fabians”

By

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A GOOD MAN FALLEN AMONG FABIANS

FOREWORD

As motto for his essay on Bernard Shaw in *Studies in a Dying Culture*, to which I am deeply indebted, Christopher Caudwell takes Lenin's words: "A good man fallen among Fabians."

This judgment of Lenin's has been the guiding idea also in this essay, which endeavours to show how good an artist Shaw is, and how it harmed him that he fell among Fabians.

I would like to express my warm thanks to Dona Torr for her many hours of work on the manuscript of this book; she made most shrewd criticisms, and helped me most generously with her great knowledge and insight.

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December 24, 1949.

To my two good friends

Garry and Paddy

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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST FOUR NOVELS

WHEN SHAW BEGAN his first novel in 1879, Victorian England was still strange to him. It was only three years since he had left Dublin, where he had spent the first twenty years of his life; and in London he had been mostly alone, with no work and few friends.

He had been brought up, he says, to regard himself as one of the propertied classes. His father, George Carr Shaw, was the second cousin of a baronet, and spoke of the Shaws "as who should say the Valois, the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs or the Romanoffs," and was horrified when one evening he found his son playing on the street with the son of the ironmonger next door. In fact, however, the family did not occupy in Dublin society the position which Shaw's father thought their due. Carr Shaw had been a civil servant; he had then sold his pension and invested the capital in the purchase of a flour-mill outside Dublin, which later failed. He was not only not successful in business. He also drank, and though he was an amiable character and had been a welcome guest in society, drink gained such a hold on him that the invitations gradually ceased.

There was also another cause of scandal. Shaw's mother, a woman twenty years younger than her husband, had a soprano voice of remarkable purity, and took lessons with an extremely able and original teacher of singing, named George John Vandeleur Lee, who also produced operas in the Dublin theatres. After her voice had been trained, Shaw's mother took part in the operas, playing Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni* Margarete in *Faust*, and other parts. As the operas were rehearsed in the Shaws' house, arrangements were simplified by Lee coming to live under the same roof. Though Mrs. Shaw was, her son says, "the sort of woman who never troubled about gossip," some gossip there must have been, and the con-

duct of the wife would not have inclined Dublin society of the 1860's to close its eyes to the failing of the husband.

Busy with her music, Shaw's mother had little leisure and little wish to occupy herself much with her family. It was an occasion to be remembered when she took him for a walk or gave him buttered toast, spreading the butter thicker than the servant would.

Shaw once compared himself with David Copperfield in the family of the Micawbers. He was not treated as a child, but rather as an adult, and left to find his own way. "The fact that nobody cared for me particularly," he wrote, "gave me a frightful self-sufficiency," and he lived on his imagination.

After being taught by a governess who only aroused his "derisive humour," and after further tuition by one of his uncles, he was sent to a Wesleyan school, where he did very little work and entertained the other boys with stories about the oddities of his uncles and the adventures of a legendary hero whom he invented, named Lobjoit. He was more diligent at his second school, and it was suggested that he might later go to Trinity College, Dublin; but Shaw was not interested, saying that all T.C.D. men were the same.

When he was fourteen, he was put into a job as clerk in a land-agent's office. Though he acquired businesslike habits and was soon promoted to keeping the cash (the cashier having absconded), he was quite indifferent to this advance and did not even trouble particularly to ask for a rise in wages. The real world for him was still that of his imagination. He taught himself to play the piano, and when the Shaw family broke up and Mrs. Shaw went to London (where Lee had already gone), Shaw played and sang the operas he no longer heard in the house. He spent hours in the Dublin Art Gallery; he read Shelley. This world of imagination and art mattered more to him than the world of success to which he did not aspire, and was a refuge from the world which he hated—the squalid Dublin tenements where his nurse had secretly taken him as a child when she wanted to drink with her friends, and where he now had to go every week collecting the rents (an experience which he later put to use in *Widowers' Houses*).

In March, 1876, he gave notice at the office, and left for London. He was a young man of twenty.

During his first three years in London, where he lived with his mother and sisters in a house off Brompton Road, Shaw did little but keep his freedom. He resisted all pressure to put him into a job. Lee sometimes engaged him to play the piano accompaniments at his musical evenings, and as Lee's ghost he wrote some musical criticism; but he had no regular paid work until 1879, when for some months he was employed with the Edison telephone company, deriving great delight, as he relates in the preface to *The Irrational Knot*, from the obvious uncertainty of visitors, after he had demonstrated the telephone to them, as to whether they ought to tip him.

He kept himself aloof also from the social life of London, making little use of the few introductions he had been given; for he was afraid, he says, lest some well-meaning acquaintance might find him work. Diffidence also held him back. He had a standing invitation for Sunday evenings to the house of Cecil Lawson, the painter, in Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, and he describes in the preface to *Immaturity* his agonies of shyness before he could bring himself to ring the bell.

In 1879 he began the writing of his novels, setting himself the task—and carrying it out—of filling five quarto pages every day.

I

The exclusion of his family from the respectable society of Dublin, his own solitariness within the family, and his loneliness in London were the immediate experience of life from which Shaw made his novels.

Their most immediately striking characteristic is the fact that in all of them one principal figure is detached from his surroundings; he, and he alone, is conscious of a distance of superiority between himself and others; and the reader is subtly directed to accord to him a special sympathy, because he feels himself the centre of his world as each reader—so the style of the self-regarding author assumes—feels himself the centre of his own. In this respect, though the novels are remarkably objective, their tone is that of the pronoun "I".

It is not the world-embracing exaltation of romanticism, but rather a refusal of the world, a rejection, a sense of estrangement, and a silently defiant self-sufficiency. With firm determination,

Shaw from the very first pages of his first novel *Immaturity* makes his hero resolutely encamp himself, with toy cannons, outside the walls of society.

Robert Smith, without family, relations, or friends, moves into lodgings. They are in a block of tenements in Islington—one has the impression of hard, smoke-grimed brick, a flagged square like a prison-yard with identical doors and windows all closed, and an iron plate bearing the name Dodd's Buildings. Robert Smith "despondently surveyed the court for some time." Note that "for some time"; the duration of the survey suggests the detachment with which it is made.

When he contemplates his apartment with its two cane chairs and mahogany bed, the reflection that it is to be his home strikes cold to his heart. But he wastes no time in self-pity. Having warmed himself before the fire, "ruefully stroking his shins," he methodically arranges his possessions. After he has put away a suit of black evening dress and locked the drawer, "to be opened only at such rare intervals as the danger of moths rendered advisable," and disposed of the rest of his apparel, there remains an old tool chest containing a scrapbook with instructions for making fireworks, two toy brass cannons, and a common ironmonger's pistol. "They were relics of his boyhood, and proofs of his homelessness; for who ever removes such things from his father's house whilst any of his kin are to be found there?" But Smith does not give way to emotion: he only shakes his head (a characteristic gesture of his), places the box in one corner "with as much care as if he were still interested in miniature artillery and experimental chemistry," and proceeds to arrange his books. Everything being unpacked, and the alarm clock in its place on the mantelpiece, he sits down again by the fire and plans his budget for the coming year, drawing the lines neatly with a ruler.

Of his heart-breaking loneliness Smith allows no sign to escape him except that one shake of his head over the relics of his boyhood and his vanished home. He can do without a home. He settles as carefully into this single room as if he were to spend his life there; a hermit could not arrange his cell more irrevocably.

The next novel, *The Irrational Knot*, opens with a description of the hero regarding himself in the mirror as he ties his evening

dress tie, "concentrated and calm, making no tentative movements of any sort"; and the time of the action is sufficiently prolonged for readers to be made aware of the confident intercourse of the hero with his own reflection.

The hero—Edward Conolly is his name—is going to sing at an amateur charity concert given by the Duchess of Carbury to entertain the people of Wandsworth. On Conolly's arrival at the hall, tension between him and the other performers immediately comes into the atmosphere. As if in his mind's eye were still the image of himself in the glass calmly tying his bow, now with the same coolness he hangs up his coat and hat (the others had carelessly laid their things on a table), places his music ready to his hand, and calculates when his turn to sing will come. Having time at his disposal, he turns with disconcerting self-possession to examine the rest of the company, as the negation of himself.

His eye falls on the girl who is to be his wife, Marian Lind. How does such a man fall in love? We do not learn. Some resolve is firmly taken far back behind his impenetrable eyes, and at the beginning of a chapter Marian Lind receives a letter from Conolly, informing her that he has a proposal to make: "You will please put the usual construction on the word 'proposal'." This rationalist does not describe his feelings, for he does not understand them well enough "to do it accurately"; but he appoints the Royal Academy (on opening day) as the place of assignation. In passing from one room to another, they come face to face; as Conolly makes to pass on, Marian puts out her hand to stop him. He takes it "as a gift at once". Then, no word said, he leads her round the pictures, criticizing their "historical or technical inaccuracy".

Not even when the hero "falls in love" does any stirring of emotion or desire trouble his calm detachment. He remains himself, and the woman not himself; and there is no uniting of these opposites. They marry, but he stays unmarried.

One scene in *The Irrational Knot* is symbolic of the hero's relation to society.

Marian Lind, now Marian Conolly, her cousin Marmaduke, a friend of her girlhood named Elinor, and her former admirer Sholto Douglas, with whom she subsequently runs away to America, are profiting by Conolly's absence to spend together

the kind of evening they enjoy, singing folk songs round the piano (beneath Conolly's coolly observing eye they would not dare to sing). Then Marian hears the click of her husband's latchkey; she hastily closes the piano, and sits down some distance from it.

Conolly enters.

'Ah!' he said, surprised, 'I thought somebody was singing.'
'Oh dear no!' said Elinor drily. 'You must have been mistaken.'

'Perhaps so,' said he, smiling. 'But I have been listening carefully at the window for ten minutes; and I certainly dreamt that I heard Auld Robin Gray.'

Inside the lighted room, people are sociable; in the night outside, the individual secretly and carefully listens, an eavesdropper on happiness.

II

Yet in the very fact that Shaw wrote the novels, and in the care with which he wrote them, lay a contradiction of this detachment of the hero from his fellows. Shaw was using language, the means of communication with his fellows, and using it in a way that showed his deep respect for it; he was continuing the tradition of the novel; in the punctual observance of his rule to write every day five pages, neither more nor less (if he was in the middle of a sentence when he reached the bottom of the fifth page, he stopped and completed the sentence next day), he was obeying, as he says, the habits of regularity formed in the land-agent's office. He was writing to please himself; but he was also writing carefully in a given medium and form. And he wanted readers; he was writing in the hope (not fulfilled until he had given up writing novels) that his novels would be published and become part of the body of literature. Though his heroes appear detached from society, he himself inevitably wrote for society, because he was part of it.

That fact is more fundamental than the exclusion of his family from Dublin "society", or his own painful shyness in London "society": and because Shaw is an artist, his work is no mere day-dream in which the calm concentration of his imagined self as he ties his evening dress tie compensates for infuriating humiliations suffered by his real self at Kensington soirées. His work expresses not only personal resentments, but also a human vitality which is in conflict with the heroes' negative aloofness.

This can be felt both in the general character of the novels and in their details.

First novels in which the hero so closely resembles his creator as Robert Smith resembled Shaw are apt to be self-centred; but not so *Immaturity*. It continues in its objectivity the tradition of the classical period of the English novel. Its structure is a linking of one main plot and three sub-plots; Robert Smith is incidentally involved in them all, but is not the hero of any; he is part of life, not its sole focus.

The stories that Shaw weaves together to make the novel are all good stories, and far too subtly told to be summarised. The characters remain in the memory with an impression of actual reality; particularly a Scotch dressmaker, a notable painter who marries her, and a consumptive revivalist preacher who falls hopelessly in love with her and is found dead in a prison cell, where the police, mistaking his illness and passion for drunkenness, have locked him up for the night. The love of all three is real; as in life, they seem the most unlikely people to fall in love with one another, but they do; and when it has happened, one feels, without being able to explain, why.

Although in the later novels there is a shift of the centre of interest towards the hero, they too display the same objectivity: the hero does not always dominate the stage, and life does not revolve exclusively round him.

In the very first scene of *The Irrational Knot*, while Conolly is absorbed with his reflection, a girl enters the room.

"Quite unconcerned at the presence of the man, she poured out a cup of tea; carried it to the mantlepiece; and began to arrange her hair before the glass."

Whilst she was doing it,

“ she whistled a long and florid cadenza, and added, by way of instrumental interlude, a remarkably close imitation of a violoncello.”

The contrast of the two figures (the woman is Conolly's sister, Susanna) before their mirrors—Conolly's rigorous self-centredness as he looks earnestly at his reflection, and the woman's self-forgetful freedom as she whistles the cadenza and thinks of ten thousand things besides herself—is easy to overlook; for the author himself so centres attention on Conolly as if he were the only admirable person, that one must continually remind oneself that Shaw is the creator not only of Conolly, but also of this woman who by some miracle is alive from the moment she enters the room. And if an author is to be known best where he is most creative, rather than through his own comments, direct or indirect, upon his creations, then that side of Shaw through which he identifies himself with Conolly and shares his hero's opinion that Susanna is a fool (at the end of the book he suddenly transforms her into a dipsomaniac), is less important than the artist who created her.

And just as even in this first scene the hero becomes less real than the woman, so in the later part of the book Shaw's creative interest seems to detach itself from him still more, while he observes and describes the inevitable progress of the reluctant, constrained love-making between Marian, who is afraid of infidelity, and Sholto Douglas, a bad poet no longer young, who is beginning to love his comfort more than love.

Similarly, in *Love Among the Artists*, the character with whom Shaw seems to identify himself most closely, a composer named Owen Jack living in his “ holy attic ”, plays only a secondary part in the story, which is a study of the earnestly intentioned but unwilling engagement between a painter, named Adrian Herbert, who knows he cannot paint, and his pupil, Mary Sutherland, who tries not to know it; and of how the engagement is broken and each chooses in marriage someone who is the complete opposite of their former tie.

The details of the novels also are expressive of a pleased interest in common life which contrasts strongly with the

detached aloofness of the heroes. Thus in *Immaturity* there is a little servant-girl named Rose, who is absolutely engrossed in the serious business of living, an absurd joy whenever she appears.

Or in *Cashel Byron's Profession*, there is a scene where Cashel Byron, the world-famous prize-fighter, is recognized while he is walking through one of the poor streets of London with the heroine, Lydia Carew:

“The two were followed by a double file of little ragamuffins, who, with their eyes fixed earnestly on Cashel, walked on the footways whilst he conducted Lydia down the middle of the narrow street. Not one of them turned a somersault or uttered a shout. Intent on their hero, they pattered along, coming into collision with every object that lay in their path.”

In that description of the urchins (that single word *pattered* makes one feel their bare dirty feet on the pavement) there is a fundamental quality of all good writing, a profound friendliness to what is living.

Continually beneath the surface of a style as polite, in the best sense of the word, as the Georgian architecture of Dublin's squares there is to be felt a repressed impishness.

That quality in Shaw's writing which Stevenson called “blooming gaseous folly” runs completely wild in *Cashel Byron's Profession*, with its description of the boxing match between Cashel and Paradise organized by a distraught Colonial Office for the entertainment of a Zulu king, who is so delighted with the bloodshed that he offers Cashel, the Galahad-like wooer of a noble lady, Lydia Carew, three native wives if he will return with him to Africa. In the same novel, there is Lydia's footman, Bashville (Stevenson said of him “J'en chortle”), who is consumed with a hopeless passion for his mistress and with trembling knees stands to guard her against Cashel; unravels the philosophy of Spinoza in an hour; and on his walks down Whitehall on his free afternoons, wearing cinnamon gloves and carrying a silver-mounted cane, is often taken for a Junior Lord of the Treasury.

The repressed pleasure in “blooming gaseous folly” which is felt so frequently in the style sometimes threatens to burst through even the self-possession of the heroes. Robert Smith, when he

most wants to be serious, is liable to be seized by "a certain aimless facetiousness", which he can only repress by taking up a serious book. Even Conolly is seen one night to dance a hornpipe all by himself in the middle of a field. Owen Jack playing one of his own compositions on the piano in an empty house,

"chanted with the full strength of his formidable voice until he came to the final chord, which he struck violently, and repeated in every possible inversion from one end of the keyboard to the other. Then he sprang up, and strode excitedly to and fro in the room."

With that objectivity which enables Shaw to make the secondary characters no less real, or more real, than the heroes and to charge with vitality a servant-girl or an office-boy who may only appear for a few moments, there is also a gift of "self-forgetful narrative," as Stevenson well said. There is no wild excitement, or thrilling suspense; indeed, the plot sometimes almost loses itself—Shaw relates that when the writing of *Love Among the Artists* was interrupted by illness, he had to read back to recall what it was about. Nevertheless, one always reads on with the trusting contentment of listening to someone who knows how to tell a story.

III

Thus there is within the very style of the novels an antagonism which is the counterpart to that in the action between the sociable group singing songs in the lighted room and the hero carefully listening at the window in the darkness. Shaw himself belongs to the group through his love of life, his pleasure in observing the rich variety of human nature, his respect for the common medium of the English language, and his readiness to forget himself and to entertain his readers like a popular storyteller. But he is also the solitary figure at the window, and in the care with which he contrives triumphs for the hero, such as the embarrassing effect of Conolly's revelation that he has been

listening to their singing for the last ten minutes, he makes it clear that he shares his hero's contempt for the sociable group.

And not without reason. For in one sense he is more alive than they. The hero's rejection of social ties, Robert Smith's self-sufficient seclusion in his hermit's cell, Conolly's refusal to write a love-letter, is not mere negation. Robert Smith surveys the world from a remote distance; but as he watches, he thinks. So does Owen Jack; so does Conolly, though we are not allowed to share his thoughts as he stands at the window. All of them think more truly than the Philistines whom they despise. And when they not only contemptuously contemplate them, but actively fight them, Shaw expresses through his heroes the same love of life as through his secondary characters; and it is a more profound expression, because the love is for the change and conflict in life of which the sociable group in the lighted room have no conception.

The conflict is that of the living energy of human beings thwarted by and fighting against stupidity, snobbishness, hypocrisy and tyranny, against the vices of English middle-class respectability.

Marian Lind, remotely connected with the aristocracy and less remotely with Lancashire cotton, wants to marry Edward Conolly. But Conolly is only an electrical engineer, inventor of some new electric motor, hardly better than a workman. Marian's clergyman brother is therefore despatched to Conolly to appeal to him as one of nature's gentlemen to recognize that he is no gentleman and that marriage with him could not be to Marian's happiness. In the argument, Conolly wipes the floor with him. Having failed in this errand, the clergyman is sent off to Conolly's sister, Susanna, who is living as his mistress with Marian's cousin, to appeal to her, with the help of cash, not to bring disgrace on their family.

“ I will say nothing at present of the sin of it: you will have to account for that before a greater than I.”

“ Just so, Doctor. You don't mind the sin; but when it comes to a scandal —— ! ”

They all profess the most lively interest in science and are eager to understand the principles of Conolly's electric motor,