

The Economical Bernard Shaw

*Showing that the Career of a Shavian Character By
No Means Ends with the Fall of the Final Curtain
by St. John Ervine*

MR. SHAW, if he were offered the choice between being the greatest dramatist in the world and the greatest political economist, would probably prefer the latter distinction. I am not, however, going to write about his abilities as an economist, but about his extraordinary thrift as a dramatist. Shakespeare, compared with Mr. Shaw, was a prodigal. Mr. Shaw, compared with Shakespeare, seems positively stingy. But it is not stinginess that causes Mr. Shaw to repeat characters and situations in his plays. He is a mystic, and all mystics are very direct and simple in their manners and methods of work. Shakespeare primarily was interested in people. Mr. Shaw primarily is interested in doctrine. It is obvious that the broad difference between a dramatist interested chiefly in characters and a dramatist interested chiefly in beliefs is that the former will delight in the greatest variety of people, whereas the latter will not trouble to create new characters if old ones will do.

When Sir Horace Plunkett chose a mystic poet, "A. E." (George W. Russell), instead of a business man to take a prominent part in organizing the Irish agricultural co-operative movement, Mr. Arthur Balfour commended the choice on the ground that a mystic is the most practical of men, since he will use any instrument that suits his purpose, whereas your business man will fuss about details and tools and immediate profits and forget all about the final purpose. Mr. Shaw's method of writing a play is a remarkable demonstration of the way in which a mystic works. His indifference to details is such that he might almost be described as the laziest of dramatists. I doubt whether there are really more than twelve people in the whole of his novels and plays. When he began his career as a writer, he started off with five novels, four of which have been published. Then he discovered that novel-writing was not the means by which he could best express himself, and so he turned to the drama. But he did not waste his novels. He dramatized them. He lifted whole passages out of the dialogue of these novels and, after trimming them, put them into the plays. He took some of the characters and, after tidying them up and changing their names, forced them out of their covers on to the stage. There is nothing in the thirty-eight plays he has written which cannot be found, developed or in embryo, in his four novels. He has preached one doctrine all his life and he



(Hirschfeld)
has preached it with remarkable consistency.

I do not propose to discuss that doctrine now. My intention is merely to point out the parsimoniousness with which it is preached. If the reader will compare a very early play, *You Never Can Tell*, with a later play, *Major Barbara*, he will discover an economy in apparatus that is almost scandalous. The whole of the first act of *Major Barbara* is almost identically a repetition of the first act of *You Never Can Tell*. Lady Britomart Undershaft in the first piece is Mrs. Clandon of the second under another name. The situation of the two women is almost exactly similar. Lady Britomart, like Mrs. Clandon, is living apart from her husband and has not seen him for a number of years. She, too, has a couple of daughters and a son with the haziest or no recollections of their father. A meeting between the two parents and the children is arranged on a flimsy pretext. Lady Britomart, like Mrs. Clandon, is a strong-minded, silly woman, who has abandoned her husband for a childish reason. Her elder daughter, Barbara, is Gloria Clandon. Her younger daughter, Sarah, is a much-chastened and rather spiritless Dolly Clandon. The son, however, is different. What became of Philip Clandon I do not know, but I suspect that Mr. Shaw, in changing the Clandon family into the Undershaft family, carelessly mislaid Philip, and in the course of a hurried search for him discovered another youth, the result, undoubtedly of a secret love affair between Mrs. Clandon and Finch McComas, whom he hastily thrust into Philip's place under the name of Stephen Britomart.

Continuous Characters

ADOLPHUSCUSINS, the Professor of Greek, who joins the Salvation Army in order to win the love of Major Barbara, is simply our old friend Valentine, the dentist, from *You Never Can Tell*, after a brief career as John Tanner in *Man and Superman*. Lady Britomart, not content with running away from *You Never Can Tell* and entering *Major Barbara* under a false name, actually steals a few characteristics from Ann Whitefield in *Man and Superman* which really belong to her daughter,

Gloria-Barbara. Her habit of pretending that she is doing things at the request and for the pleasure of other people, when in fact she is doing them entirely for her own convenience, is one of the habits she boldly pinched from Ann.

A great deal of harmless entertainment can be derived by following out the career of each of the Shavian characters. Gloria Clandon, for instance, did not marry Valentine, the dentist. Mr. Shaw's people rarely marry in his plays: they merely promise to marry. Gloria did not marry Valentine for the very good reason that she would have been charged with bigamy had she done so, for she was already married, under the name of Candida to the Reverend James Mavor Morell. When it became difficult for her to resist Valentine's importunities any longer, she bolted from *You Never Can Tell* and took refuge in *Man and Superman* until Valentine, who had followed her under the name of Tanner, again got her into a difficult position, when she gathered up her skirts and ran as hard as she could to the first act of *Major Barbara*. Tanner, a very indefatigable person pretending all the time to be her victim, hurried after her, learning some Greek in his haste, and landed neatly in the West Ham shelter controlled by the Salvation Army. Heaven only knows where these two will end! There is a suspicion about that they got trapped in *Heartbreak House*, but I do not believe this. Whatever happens to them, I am certain that they will not pull up before the altar or the desk of a registrar of marriages.

It is quite easy, I think, to trace the career of each of the other twelve Shaw characters in that fashion. Think of the vivid and very interesting career of the brutal ruffian, Bill Walker, in *Major Barbara*. The reader will remember that Bill cruelly ill-used a little Salvation Army girl, called Jenny Hill, in the West Ham shelter. He struck her on the mouth and almost tore the hair off her head. Major Barbara twisted his heart for him by preaching Tolstoy's doctrine of non-resistance. And Bill could not bear to have his heart twisted in this fashion. He tried to buy forgiveness by donating his last sovereign to the Army funds, but failed completely to do so. The sight of Jenny Hill and her "silly little face" drove him into a sort of spiritual frenzy, and we felt as we witnessed the real torture from which this rough and brutalized man suffered at Major Barbara's hands that he would throw up the sponge and find salvation at the penitent's form.

That did not happen, however, for Major Barbara herself was badly let down in her ideals by the action of the Salvation Army in accepting what she called tainted money to

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carry on its enterprises. Bill Walker hurried out of the West Ham shelter, incredulous at his luck, and imagined that he was safely delivered from Major Barbara's toils. But Bill made a serious mistake. He ought to have realized that there was no escape for him and have surrendered at once. Mr. Shaw let him out of the West Ham shelter but caught him in America! Who would have dreamt, on witnessing the performance of the second act of *Major Barbara*, that Bill Walker, after punching Jenny Hill's face, in deadly terror of Barbara Undershaft's salvaging and rhetorical powers, would bolt to the United States under the name of Blanco Posnet, only to be nabbed in the end through Jenny Hill's croupy child?

The Carelessness of Detail

THE carelessness with which Mr. Shaw treats details can be observed by anyone who cares to examine the first act of *Major Barbara*. One almost believes that Mr. Shaw is here spoofing his audience, just as he spoofed them in the first act of *Man and Superman* with a trumped-up tale of impending maternity of which nothing more was heard during the remainder of the play. In *Major Barbara*, he causes seven of the characters to be assembled in the first act to discuss marriage settlements and money matters, but finishes the act without once discussing them!

Less happens in this first act than in any other first act of his. It is a protasis from which all mention of plot is carefully omitted. Bottom, had he been at Mr. Shaw's elbow when *Major Barbara* was being written, might have begged him to "grow to a point," but Bottom would have had less success with Mr. Shaw than he had with Quince. Bottom's point was a dramatic one. Mr. Shaw's is a point of doctrine; and a propounder of doctrine pays no heed to the laws of stagecraft. The purpose of Mr. Shaw becomes plain when the curtain rises on the second act of *Major Barbara*, one of the best things he has done, and here he pours forth his strange religious views in scenes of the highest comedy. One forgets instantly the poverty of the first act in discovering the richness of the second, and perhaps that is Mr. Shaw's answer to those who accuse him of stinginess in material and carelessness in detail. The mystic gets his way chiefly because you cannot frighten or disconcert him. Neither death nor tradition have any terrors for him. That is why, in spite of common sense and experience, he does what he wants to do.