

ENCOUNTERS WITH G. B. S.

By A. E. JOHNSON

J. J. Mallon: "England is an island lying off the east coast of the Irish Free State entirely inhabited by George Bernard Shaw and Lady Astor."

G. B. S.: "Why drag in Lady Astor?"

I HEARD the above at the Astor Town house in London after an informal talk by the great dramatist, never more dramatic than when himself performing impromptu. But of this meeting more later. Though I had encountered Shaw several times, it was at the Malvern Drama Festivals that I saw him most often—on the terrace, in the theatre, talking to stage hands in the intervals, and—most memorably—walking on the Malvern Hills, perhaps in the very footsteps of Langland, the poet of *Piers Plowman*.

I shall always see him against the soft green of the hills, moving like a character out of his favorite author, Bunyan, on some valiant errand of righteousness. He might have been a perambulating birchtree. Years before I had run into him in the Strand, where he looked like a lost soul; but it can be said that he went with the hills—and is there a better test of a man?

Then, at a Garden party in Malvern, given by John Drinkwater and Barry Jackson, Shaw happened along at the very moment that I was being received alone by John Drinkwater. I began to think that I was destined to run into the man; for I once encountered him also in a London Gallery. By Drinkwater I was only partially introduced; but later all the guests were photographed in a group, a company which included also J. B. Priestley, Lascelles Abercrombie, Cedric Hardwicke, Ralph Richardson, Mrs. Shaw, and the famous composer, Elgar, then over eighty: Shaw was 76, for the year was 1932.

A few days after the Garden Party, I was coffeing with the critic, Bonamy Dobree on the theatre terrace and discussing a new Shaw play, when the author himself stalked passed us. For some unaccountable reason he glared full at me, though Dobree had done most of the talking. We watched him stroll along the lower terrace, and pause obligingly while a young lady snapped him. Dobree told me he really loved and believed in his greatness.

But the occasion of my one real meeting with Shaw—as

distinct from these encounters—was at Lord Astor's town house, 4 St. James' Square, on July 5th, 1928, where a party of us had been invited to meet him. I recall his brown suit, rosy cheeks, white whiskers and hair, and his high-pitched, distinctly Irish voice; also his bright though rather small eyes of indeterminate color; and a small wart on a good, pinkish nose that could have been—though of course it was not—that of a toper.

Lady Astor who, so far from treating Shaw as an idol, jollied him as if he were a bright spoiled boy, began the discussion by asking him why he wrote *St. Joan*. G. B. S. said he thought the Maid inspired him, so that the various legends floating about might be overridden. He opined that in a sense he, G. B. S. didn't do it: he just happened to know how to arrange it, that was all. Incidentally this account does not tally with that given by Maurice Colbourne in "*The Real Bernard Shaw*", where the author maintains that "the play was born . . . simply of Mrs. Shaw's suggestion out of the blue". That lady was seated on Shaw's left; Lady Astor being on his right.

He went on to speak of Russian spirituality, and thought we should follow their example, and cease to worship the idle rich. America had but exchanged black slaves for white; all of which called forth the banter and rebuke of Lady Astor who did everything short of bearding Shaw with the loose arm of her antique chair, which she actually at one point removed. Finally, with that fearlessness which made her a terror in the House of Commons, she turned to him and said, very spiritedly: "The trouble with you, G. B., is that you think you're clever: you're not clever, you're only *good*! Isn't he, Mrs. Shaw?"

At this delicious pantomiming, which made me wonder—even then—if I were dreaming, the much-amused Shaw laughingly threw back his head and began to quote Kingsley's famous quatrain: "Be good, sweet maid, let who will be clever!" We all joined in the merriment, and Mrs. Shaw smiled serenely at Nancy Astor as if to tell her that she was right. I gained the impression that Shaw did enough talking for them both, and that his wife had long ago decided that this was so.

After the somewhat rambling, but never for one moment dull, talk, we adjourned for refreshment. G. B. took some orange juice, but literally could not consume it for chattering with a little knot of us. I chanced to be clean facing him, and might have been his microphone. It would have been impossible for me to talk back at him, even had I either the informa-

tion or the courage. He spoke, I recall, of fascism and communism, and explained the Matteotti murder.

Lady Astor interrupted us—or rather him—with a platter, and tried to make Shaw have a piece of bread and butter. Shaw refused, saying, like an actor: "Bread and butter? From *you*? You ought to give me nightingale's tongues!" I still wondered if I were dreaming; and there is a sense in which I still do.

Mr. J. J. Mallon, whom Lady Astor twitted a good deal, quoted the definition of England as "an island lying off the east coast of the Irish Free State entirely inhabited by Bernard Shaw and Lady Astor."

"*Why drag in Lady Astor?*" tallied the impish Shaw, at his shavian best; and I felt less badly about not being able to return the fire of this intellectual sniper-extraordinary, who probably argued with his mother in the womb, and who is perhaps at this moment telling God how Heaven should be run, or rather arguing that it should be done away with as a puritanical offense.

Well, all this was twenty-two years ago, when I was younger even than my years. I should be less afraid of him now, knowing more about his tricks and formulas, and the points where his armor was anything but proof against the "ordained arrows" (to quote the Psalmist) that Shaw, for all his archer's cleverness, was never able to release from his mighty bow. They were not in his quiver, and he never sat down under the holy tree from which they are cut.

But now he is silent, and any criticism is swallowed up in gratitude for his jester's entertainment of this sorry world which, he thought, (if the other planets are inhabited) must be the lunatic asylum of the Universe. To quote the *London Sunday Times* of a year or two back: "He has made more people laugh thoughtfully than Charlie Chaplin, but has rarely touched the source of tears. One of the wittiest of men, he is sometimes thought to lack a sense of humor, understanding ideas better than people. His impact on the minds of two generations has been penetrating—and salutary—yet he has often, with a formidable apparatus of dazzling logic, propounded ideas whose essential absurdity could be perceived by a child."

To say that he was ahead of his times is simply not true; he was very much of them. A more typical Victorian reactionary could not be named, unless he were H. G. Wells; nor a better victim of our polytechnic times. He would not have gone over in the 16th century; and in my opinion our children's children will wonder at the amazing homage of their grandparents to a

man who was certainly not an original philosopher (as has been claimed), nor a great economist, nor a spiritual force. A gadfly, yes, and as such most functional, and a celebrated wit, and as such a fine purgative, and indeed therapeutic, for all distraught minds. And perhaps also a John Baptist preparing the way for a great dramatist comparable with his envied fellow-craftsman (whom he tried to patronize), the author of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Lear*. No one of these masterpieces could Shaw have approximated, not even with the over-estimated *St. Joan*, where, even here, he gets in the way of his saintly subject.

Of the blood and sweat and tears, he was deficient in the first and last, the blood and the tears. And satire, alas, is a sorry substitute for the divine humor implicit in that quality which would have rectified the impiteousness of his vision, and have refined his imagination to the point where he looked through Other Eyes than those of the great god G. B. S. I mean the gift dowered upon Shakespeare, but denied to Shaw—Poetry, with all that it implies of being smitten blind in order to see, and of obtaining stature through being thrown to the earth on the road to Damascus. It wasn't that Shaw did not tread that road; he did, all his life. But his own dazzle frustrated any perception of the Great Light; while a certain levitation of mind prevented his being thrown to the earth.

It is reasonably true to say that he used up his immortality while living; and that, like Peer Gynt, he brushed away the image of His Maker through that worst of modern diseases—self-insistence.