

# The Solomonics of Saint Bernard Shaw

**I**T was late in November when it happened. An English November is depressing enough even to a native. To an elderly Irish gentleman of literary proclivities—with a passion for politics—it is apt to be more than trying. And when that Irish gentleman has for years been drilled by his admirers into regarding himself as an Instructor-General of the Universe, naturally enough the effect of a physical fog which he can do nothing to dissipate is to drive him to look round for something resembling a mental fog upon which he can vent his cultured and cultivated spleen.

Thus it came to be that late in the November of 1924, Bernard Shaw, Patron Saint of the Fabian Society, Great Grey God of every gallery flapper from Golder's Green to the Goldhawk Road, turned aside from the task of instructing God Almighty how to run the universe in order to cast a few pearls of Solomonic wisdom before the Governing Executive of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics—not necessarily for the greater glory of Shaw, but certainly for the admonition and reproof of one, Gregory Zinoviev.

## ZINOVIEV.

This Zinoviev played a great part (by proxy) and without intending it, in the late General Election in Britain. The results of that election were by no means satisfactory, either to Shaw, his acolytes or the congregation of his faithful ones. Somebody had to be blamed and—there was Zinoviev all ready to hand.

Zinoviev, too, is the President of the Communist International. As the British Labour Party had just been defeated by a Tory Party, whose election slogan was "Down with Communism"—(in anticipation of whose slogan the said Labour Party had decided—much to the Tories' comfort—to cast all Communists out of their ranks) it was necessary that Shaw in his capacity of Protecting Providence to the British Labour Party should save their diminished faces by smacking Zinoviev (and through him the Communists), good and hard. It might not hurt Zinoviev; it would not make the slightest difference to the Communists. But it would tickle the Tories and salve the sores of the ex-Cabinet Ministers and Under-Secretaries who after a

brief session in the sunlight felt their relegation to the chill of Opposition as a keen personal injury. And it would do all that while leaving the Great Saint Bernard still able to rear his snowy head as the great peak of Revolution dominating the political flats of British Socialism.

### SHAW AND REVOLUTION.

This latter consideration was much more important than might be supposed. It is one of the dear old gentleman's pet vanities to regard himself as the Very Devil (in political controversy). And truth to tell, there is much more sound revolutionary thinking concealed in his works than would seem possible to his admirers, or prove comfortable to his party were they in the habit of taking these works seriously. Happily for them—and provokingly for Shaw—they treat these things as only "Fanny's little Play," and gorge joyously upon the deliberate flap-doodle into which they are inserted like plums in a pudding.

The whole thing is a tragi-comedy only to be appreciated by Irishmen with a grasp of Marxism.

Shaw as an Irish gentleman—without means to support his gentility—came to London in the early 80's. All the Irish in him made him hate and despise alike the humbug of bourgeois Liberalism and the supineness of the British proletariat. In Ireland as a Protestant gentleman, he had been suckled from birth in a superior contempt for Fenian romantics. In England he was revolted to hear his family opinions on the lips of the "God-damned English Gentlemen," who automatically classed him as a "Fenian" because he was Irish. His soul cried out for vengeance and he joined "the Socialists" to get it.

Thus he obtained his practical contact with the British proletariat—from the elevation of the rostrum (starting with the orange-box and in time mounting to the Albert Hall). Their ingrained respectability and respectfulness revolted him still further. He wanted them to tear the bourgeoisie limb from limb—they took him seriously and began docilely to make preparations in the good old Fenian way. His inculcated contempt for Fenian methods rose up within him, and he poured forth his scorn. The proletarians dutifully laughed with him and agreed with him—and asked what was his alternative.

In principle he knew there was only one—the steady, patient unromantic preparation for a proletarian mass uprising. But at that time he was not prepared for anything so indefinitely protracted. He wanted something *now*; vengeance on the "gentlemen" who had cast him out for combining intellectual superiority

with impecuniosity—vengeance on a society which had given him cultivated tastes without means for their satisfaction. The proletariat were only prepared to do what they were bid. As he was not prepared to lead a part-Chartist, part-Blanquist, part-Fenian insurrection (nor sure even if he were willing that he would be accepted as a leader) Shaw abandoned all hope of the proletariat and turned his genius elsewhere.

And then came his Great Thought. Why not revenge himself on all his foes at once?—the English gentleman whom he despised as English and hated as snobs—the proletarians whom he despised for their sentimental and subservient respectfulness—the middle class whom he laughed at as subservient, sentimental, English, and snobbish all at once.

After all it was this middle class that consumed the bulk of such literary and musical output as there was. He was gifted with talents alike for music and literature—in the ordinary course of making a living this was the class whose tastes he must study. Why not bring his pigs to this market?

It was thus and no otherwise that George Bernard Shaw set up in Business as the Marx of the Middle Class.

### **FABIANISM.**

It is common to treat the Fabian Society as a characteristic piece of British middle class stupidity. It is nothing of the sort. It is a rich and rollicking Irish fantasy. Only an ex-Fenian with an insight in Marx could have elaborated a jest so priceless.

It took its title from the old Roman general who won his campaigns by biding his time, and putting off the day of battle until circumstances were such as to assure him victory. Its title therefore, carried within itself the suggestion of a great and glorious victory in the end, combined with a comforting assurance that the battle would not take place for some time to come.

All the middle class intellectuals within reach who, like Shaw, recognised themselves as unrecognised geniuses whom a brutal bourgeoisie scantily grudged bread-and-cheese, rose to the call. Sure of their skins—the day of Revolution being tacitly postponed to the Greek Kalends—they proceeded to assault the bourgeoisie with tracts!

The Social-Democratic “literature” of the period consisted of little else than exercises in proletarian piety, written by middle class men in a fever of exaltation over the virtues of the poor, and the vices of the rich. Fragments left floating from the wreck of mid-century neo-Jacobinism, oddments from Mazzini, and misconstrued and mangled extracts from Marx, all stewed up to—

gether in the juice of traditional English Evangelicalism made the matter of what passed for Social-Democracy in Britain in the days when the Fabian society was born.

Social-Democracy in Britain at that date was not a political method: it was a religious system with a political programme tacked on as an accessory. And a religious system bearing every mark of its Protestant Evangelical origin. Its central object of faith was a "Day of Judgment" in the shape of a Social-Democratic Revolution which was (like the Second Coming of Christ) to come "like a thief in the night." In that Day of Wrath the bourgeois goats would be separated from the Social-Democratic sheep and cast into outer darkness; whereupon would ensue a new heaven and a new earth. To prepare for that great Day, it was necessary to become "converted to" and to hold the true Social-Democratic faith (which, whomsoever should not hold without doubt he would perish everlastingly). And to preserve the faith it was necessary to recite all the formulæ with the correct emphasis, to wear the right shade of red tie, the correct "class conscious" sombrero, and quote with or without understanding, the first nine chapters of Marx's "Capital." It was a pious exercise (but not necessary to salvation) to repeat in spirit and with as much truth as was convenient, there is no God but Marx and H. M. Hyndman is his prophet." It was not at all necessary to read Marx—as for understanding him, Prophet Hyndman had done all that.

Against all this the Fabian tracts appeared as things of portent. They were sober, rational and documented with relevant facts. They demonstrated the worthlessness of Capitalism and advocated Socialism. A generation to whose guilty conscience the S.D.F. had appeared like Marat emerging from the tomb to glut his ire upon thirty million relatives of Charlot Corday turned with a gasp of amazement to meet this wonder-thing, Socialism advocated with sense and sanity. The Fabian Society has lived on the reputation of that thrill ever since.

### SHAW'S PET JOKE.

It was necessary to its original scheme that the Fabian Society should, while being "as wise as serpents," make itself appear as much as possible "as harmless as doves." But it was also necessary that it should do something—if only to maintain the sale of its tracts. To the section of the proletariat that had no taste for evangelical orgies, the Fabian Society appeared as a deliverer from nightmare Hyndmania. Somewhat to its consternation, the Fabian Society found itself elected *nem. con.* to the post

of leadership. As the Society's tacit bond of union was a conviction of the need for delaying the battle this was embarrassing. They had neither the numbers nor the machinery at their disposal to keep an insurgent proletariat properly under control. For their own sakes a machine had to be found.

Luckily just at this moment a member of the Society made a discovery. Wandering by chance into a meeting of the local Liberal Association, he found it possible to move resolutions and get them carried for the Agenda of the Conference of the National Liberal Association. At once the thought came—why not steal the machine of the Liberal Party and thus obtain the means of keeping the Proletariat under restraint?

The idea caught on, and thus was born the Fabian policy of permeation—the “slow, wise Fabian smile” which marks an appreciation of the jest of harnessing proletarian energies to Liberal achievements. When at a later date the ineradicable malice of the Proletariat found vent in the formation of the *Independent Labour Party*, and later of the Labour Representation Committee (now the Labour Party), the Fabian Society was sufficiently accustomed to “nuclei work” to repeat the manoeuvre each time, with success magnified by proficiency born of experience and by the greater tractability of the material.

But the permeation policy had its vulnerable side—as the birth of the I.L.P. proved. The demonstration of the villainies of capitalism had its readiest audience among the more enlightened proletarians, and the more they were convinced, the less ready they were to delay the battle. Here Hyndman scored: and to the slogan of “class war,” the S.D.F. charged to the assault upon the permeation policy.

Something had to be done about it; and here the genius of Bernard Shaw rose to its zenith.

He knew (what few knew) that Hyndmanism was no more Marxism than Marxism was Mormonism. And he knew also that the faithful followers of Hyndman were as far removed from Marx as they were devoted to their prophet. To vindicate Marx against Hyndman would have been no more than a private and personal satisfaction. It would have destroyed the Fabian Society and its permeation policy, along with Hyndman, and put Shaw for ever outside the cultivated middle class public, who alone could buy his manufactures.

Far more politically and personally advantageous was it to treat Hyndman as Marx, and in bashing Hyndman to pieces pretend that it was Marx he was tumbling into ruin. It had besides, the irresistible merit of being a screaming joke if you were

only in the secret. All the Irish devil in him rose up and danced as Shaw sailed into Hyndman to the tune of "Old Grandfather Marx." When he was able to palm off a quotation from Marx as his own argument to prove that Marx was a "back number," and so trap Hyndman into ferociously assaulting a Marxian argument in the name of Marx, Shaw's joy knew no bounds. He has never stopped laughing since, and now that the situation between the Social-Democrats and the Communists somewhat parallels the old confrontation of Fabian and Social-Democrats, he cannot resist the temptation to try to pull Zinoviev's leg in the way he managed to pull Hyndman's.

### MARXISM IN EXCELCIS.

But, alas for Shaw, both he and the world are grown older. He is not so nimble as he was, and a theoretical spar between Socialist leaders is no longer a family matter. The world has grown grey with the exhalations of capitalism in its death throes. Even the Fabian Society can no longer believe in its ability permanently to "delay the battle." Lapse of time has given to its hands for leadership a Labour Party whose membership is counted in millions. And every day those millions clamour louder to be led.

Can Shaw lead them back to the Liberal Party? Can he even think of it?

There before his eyes, if ever he ventures into the House of Commons, and casts a glance into the corner where sits Ali Baba George, with his hungry forty, is the concrete verdict of history upon the Fabian policy of permeation—the five million votes for the Labour Party in the teeth of Tory screams and MacDonalдите sneers against Communism are equally a concrete vindication of the foresight of Marx.

Nay worse! He cannot make his joke about the supersession of Marx by himself and Sidney Webb without addressing it, not to a handful of semi-literate cockney proletarians in a London cellar—but to the Marxist masters of the Kremlin, rulers of one-sixth part of the habitable globe.

The sense of difficulty is on him. He feels that just as his hair has no longer the blaze of battle, but has blanched with time, and its transformation, so quite other and differently equipped opponents stand before him. Surely only old age made him bid for the support of Wells?—the Wells whom once he made rings round? Surely the powers of the Old Devil have decayed when he can contrast "Capital" with the "Outlines of History"—'tis like saying that four o'clock is a great advance upon four pounds of butter. Surely weakness could no further go than in trying to

make a case against Zinoviev by quoting (at this date!)—the Constitution of the Communist International?

### **THE FABIAN SOLOMON.**

Truly is it written you cannot teach an old dog new tricks. Fixed in Shaw's mind is the General Election, and the name of Zinoviev. But for that election and the "Zinoviev letter" the Royal Family itself might have been "permeated" by now. The chance of the middle class leading a tame proletariat into a Garden City New Jerusalem dwindled from the moment that the Labour Party was forced to fight on working class issues, such as the Russian Treaty, the Loan to Russia, and the Campbell Case. The Zinoviev "bombshell" did not shake the proletariat—but it smashed utterly the foundations of Fabian domination of the Labour Party.

This to Shaw, means an end to a delightful dream. And like every dreamer, he clings to the illusion to the last. From the point of view of "British" Socialism (Fabian-cum-I.L.P. brand), there ought never to have been a proletarian revolution in Russia. It is, therefore, necessary for "British" Socialists to prove to themselves that no such thing happened. It is a sign of their bankruptcy that nobody else will tackle the job but the Old Man of the Party—Bernard Shaw. And a proof of his embarrassment that he has nothing to add to his old squib that Marx "became obsolete" the day Shaw was born—beyond the trite petit bourgeois moan against "taking orders from Moscow."

There is only one thing certain—Shaw's faith was wrecked at the last election. He seeks his revenge upon Zinoviev; but it is really a Solomonic protest against the whole cosmic scheme for evolving in a way unpredicted by G. B. Shaw. Yet a little while and he will—saying "All is Vanity"—abandon the universe to its fate, and leave the proletariat to clean up the mess which persists in growing despite barriers of Fabian tracts, piled to keep it back.

And wherever the proletariat take in hand the solution of their own destiny—whatever their immediate slogan—Marx lives and triumphs.

T. A. JACKSON