BERNARD SHAW AS A LETTER WRITER

CYRIL CLEMENS

WHETHER we agree with Shaw or not, we must admit that he can always be counted on to write a most amusing letter. It has been my privilege to know him for some ten years. We first met when I called upon him on his seventy-fourth birthday to pay respects—July 26, 1930. He was in exceedingly genial mood, and, amongst many other things he spoke about Mark Twain's *Autobiography*.

"There was only one immortal passage in the whole book," declared Shaw. "That was the one which describes how as a boy Clemens, living in a region of all sorts of frightful catastrophes—hurricanes, earthquakes, steamers wrecked or blown up on the rivers, babies eaten by alligators or bitten by rattlesnakes, and murders galore—was taught that all these calamities were sent by the Almighty as a warning to him to repent and be a good boy. He would wake up in the middle of the night when it was thundering and lightning, overwhelmed with a sense of his personal responsibility for the death of so many innocent persons, and would behave himself quite well for nearly two days afterwards.

"I was disappointed in Mark's *Autobiography*", Shaw went on; "the more especially since he had followed the method that I had always suggested for such a book: no definite plan, but just to give your recollections as they came floating in upon the consciousness.

"And then he followed another one of my suggestions, that the early years of a man's life should be stressed. For I think that all biographies cease to be interesting once the subject has reached maturity. I cannot read a biography further than the childhood and early years. After that, all biographies are the same, and there is no use in reading them.

"Men of my generation", continued Shaw, "all enjoyed Mark Twain. Most of them were brought into personal contact with him, and they could really appreciate him. Although it may surprise you, William Morris greatly admired *Huckleberry Finn* and was always quoting it. Lady Gregory kept a picture of Mark Twain in her study. I think that Oscar Wilde got much

of his fondness for exaggeration from Mark Twain. He loved to tell a story the humor of which was based on excessive exaggeration. On one occasion Wilde told me about a man who had invented a marvellous new theatre seat, which took up less room and did not cost nearly as much to install as the ordinary seat. He was very anxious to interest a number of millionaires in his scheme, so a wealthy friend arranged that he should meet them at a dinner party.

"All during the meal the inventor told the millionaires what a marvellous saving his new seats would be to the theatre owners all over the world; then he told what a saving would result if all the theatres in America used his seats; then all the churches; then all the public halls; and finally all the buildings in the world, the figures becoming more and more astronomical at each advance. When he finished, he was speaking to an empty table; for all the millionaires had slipped away, one by one!"

A year before this, Shaw had written about his first meeting with Twain:

4 Whitehall Court, S.W.I.
December 18, 1929.

Dear Mr. Clemens,

I met Mark Twain late in his lifetime, on two occasions. On one of the visits to London made by my biographer, Archibald Henderson, I met him at the railway station, and found that Mark Twain had come over in the same boat and was in the same train. There was a hasty introduction, amid the scramble for luggage which our queer English way of handling passengers' baggage involves; and after a word or two I tactfully took myself and Henderson off.

Some days later, Clemens walked into our flat in Adelphi Terrace. Our parlor maid, though she did not know who he was, was so overcome by his personality that she admitted him unquestioned and unannounced, like the statue of the Commandant.

Whether it was on that occasion, or a later one that he lunched with us, I cannot remember; but at any rate he did lunch with us, and told us stories of an old Mississippi storekeeper. He presented me with one of his books, and autographed the inside of the cloth case, on the ground that when he autographed fly leaves they were torn out and sold.

He had a complete gift of intimacy, which enabled us to treat one another as if we had known one another all our lives, as indeed I had known him through his early books, which I read and revelled in before I was twelve years old.

Yours sincerely,
G. Bernard Shaw.

Once when I wrote to Shaw asking him if I could dedicate one of my books on my kinsman, he replied,

Dear Mr. Clemens,

Mark's dedication to John Smith cannot be improved upon. I am against dedications: they remind me of "Toil, envy, want: the patron and the jail," when authors were beggars. He belongs to the whole English speaking world. Dedicate to it, not to me.

Yours sincerely,
G. Bernard Shaw.

Once when I was doing a biography of the author of the *Shropshire Lad*, I asked Shaw if he knew him:

4 Whitehall Court, S.W.I.
28 October, 1936.

Dear Mr. Clemens,

I do not come into the A.E. Housman saga. I was introduced to him by Edmund Goose in Westminster Abbey at Thomas Hardy's funeral, where we were both pallbearers. We said Howd'y do and shook hands; and that was the beginning and the end of it. As to the *Shropshire Lad*, I am only one of the general public.

Laurence Housman is the only member of the family whom I had any personal relations with, or in whom I took any special interest.

Faithfully,
G. Bernard Shaw.

The next letter is in answer to our offering Shaw the Mark Twain medal, which is given for pre-eminence in some cultural field. I also asked him to pay tribute to Gilbert Chesterton, to whom a Memorial was being arranged:

4 Whitehall Court, S.W.I.
1st. April, 1937.

Dear Cyril Clemens,

I am highly gratified by the award you announce in your letter of the 28th. February. A Mark Twain Medal is something worth having.

I cannot remember when I first met Chesterton. I was so much struck by a review of Scott's *Ivanhoe* which he wrote for the *Daily News*, in the course of his earliest notable job as feuilletonist to that paper, that I wrote to him asking him who he was and where he came from, as he was evidently a new star in literature. He was either too shy or too lazy to answer. The next thing I remember is his lunching with us on quite intimate terms, accompanied by Belloc.

Our actual physical contacts, however, were few, as he never belonged to the Fabian Society nor came to its meetings (this being my set), whilst his Fleet Street Bohemianism lay outside my vegetarian, teetotal, non-smoking tastes. Besides, he apparently liked literary society; and it had the grace to like him. I avoided it; and it loathed me.

But of course we were very conscious of one another. I enjoyed him and admired him keenly, and nothing could have been more generous than his treatment of me. Our controversies were exhibition spars, in which nothing could have induced either of us to hurt the other.

By the way, since you connect the medal with my sketch of William Morris, it may interest you to know that Morris was a confirmed Mark Twainer: he rated *Huckleberry Finn* as one of the world's great books, and read it over and over again.

Faithfully,

G. Bernard Shaw.

The following was written right on the fly-leaf of an old edition of *The Common-Sense of Municipal Trading*, which I had asked Shaw to inscribe. After Shaw had accepted the Medal, I wrote him that it had always been the custom in inscribing the Medal to draw some parallel with the classic past, and I quoted what had been done in the case of past recipients, "Lloyd George, the English Cincinnatus," "W. B. Yeats, the Irish Hesiod," and "Robert Frost, the American Horace", and I suggested for his Medal; "Bernard Shaw, the Modern Euripides". Notice that it is the first time that Shaw drops the "G" in signing the letter—if a message written in a book can be called that:

Ayot St. Lawrence
24th. October, 1937.

Dear Cyril Clemens,

I look drearily on this thirty-year old edition, quite strange to me, of a book which I cannot connect with you and your interests at all.

What the dickens do you want me to do with it?

I repeat that I haven't the faintest recollection of my first meeting with Barrie. I seem to have known him ever since I came to England in 1876. If you want to do him honor, why drag me into it? Just clear the stage, and leave him to fill it.

If you send me a medal struck to the Modern So, and So I shall pawn it. I am not the modern anybody: I am myself, neither a repetition of any forerunner nor a model for any successor, but simply and uniquely,

Bernard Shaw.

In my copy of *Cashel Byron's Profession* Shaw wrote,

12th. August, 1938.

Dear Cyril Clemens,

This is not my favorite novel. I have no favorites among my works: they are all legitimate.

My novels are my prentice work, and my complete failure to find a publisher for any of them was for me a hardening process from which I have never quite recovered.

I forget the text of the tributes you mention; but provided they appear as quotations in a book by somebody else, you may do as you please.

Faithfully,
G. Bernard Shaw.

In my copy of *The Irrational Knot* Shaw had the following to say,

Dear Cyril Clemens,

These sixty-year-old novels of mine always surprise me when they appear like ghosts.

I don't remember when I first met Yeats. It was so long ago that my hair was very auburn and his very black, and neither of us as yet of much account.

G. Bernard Shaw.

Not long ago I sent Shaw eight statements which I had read about him, and asked if they were true (all his own additions to the statements I put in *quotes*):—

(1) George Bernard Shaw recently was paid a handsome sum for writing his own obituary to be used in a London newspaper when he dies. "I was asked to write one; but I did not do it; no money was mentioned."

(2) His play *Saint Joan* revived on the Broadway stage by Katharine Cornell has been netting the famous playwright $2,500 a week. "Figures are dangerous when they are variable. $2,000 would be an outside guess."

(3) He started life in Dublin, Ireland, and earned his first money as an office boy before advancing to a position of cashier for a real estate agency. "For managing the estates of absentee country gentlemen. (A real estate agency means something quite different in America)."

(4) In his first nine years of writing for money, Shaw made only forty-five dollars. "Made practically nothing. Nobody would publish his books."

(5) He began raising his now famous beard at the age of nineteen. "At the age of 24 years."

(6) He never wears a shirt when bathing, claiming that his whiskers are long enough to cover his chest. He usually uses his under shorts as swimming trunks. "I do not wear undershorts. This is all rubbish!"

(7) His hobby is collecting cigar bands. "Silly nonsense."

(8) He loves to revel in the sunshine. At his country estate he has a revolving hut which rotates as the sun moves. "This is correct."

Shaw contended that the extent of his knowledge of birds was the ability to distinguish a parrot from a canary. His *Doctor's Dilemma* also shows a lack of knowledge in the medical field. "On the contrary, it is admittedly a book which every medical student ought to read. It has never been challenged technically. It was carefully revised by medical experts."

And then Shaw ended by saying, "Be careful about these silly lies which circulate—or used to circulate—in the American press. People want serious stuff about me now, when they want anything about me at all."

Perhaps I cannot end better than by quoting what Shaw sent when I asked him for a tribute upon the occasion of Mark Twain's centenary;

"Greetings, and best wishes that humour may be the great indivisible link between the two Continents.

G. Bernard Shaw."

NOTE

4 Whitehall Court,
London, S.W.I.
22 August, 1939.

Mr. Cyril Clemens is authorized by me to quote in full the eight copyright letters contained in the nine pages of this article, which in all other respects has my approval.

G. Bernard Shaw.