

## LIFE IS TOO SHORT

By Alexander Woollcott

OLD Bernard Shaw, full of years now and a little conscious of them, has written his richest and most voluminous work on the lamentable insufficiency of the allotted three score years and ten. In a rather dizzying succession of leaping scenes and still more leaping prefaces, he sets forth the urgent advisability of men's learning how to live three centuries if they do not wish nature to discard them contemptuously in favor of a more ingenious and competent species. They can do it if they set their minds to it, just as easily as they invented teeth for their convenience.

This potential human feat he has celebrated in a piece called "Back to Methuselah", a play so long and so abundant that, in performance, it would be likely to irk those of us who have not yet acquired Methuselah's comfortable sense of there being plenty of time. But it makes grand reading.

In this, his latest and, by certain dubious implications, his last play, Shaw has assembled more thoroughly than ever before the creed of his faith, Creative Evolution, wherein he finds plenty of room for aspiration by recognizing the evidences of purpose and will-directed growth which had seemed mere aimless and senseless accident to all the dazed and despondent stepchildren of Darwin. Thus blessed, he can go in, however belatedly, for his real business in life. He can be what an artist, in so far as he differs from a clown, is supposed to be. He can go to work, to use his own ugly phrase, "as an iconographer of the religion of his time". Even without being an habitu  of the Shavian regions, you can imagine what a fine time he has

weeding vigorously in the Garden of Eden—now and then trampling obliviously, it must be admitted, on some of its rarest flowers.

The scarcely revolutionary notion that life is too short—that much of his creed must sound vaguely familiar—seems to have struck Shaw with its full force in the course of a war when a good many of his fellow citizens were oppressed by a feeling that life couldn't be too short to suit them. But the war itself and the events of its aftermath, do serve to emphasize his dark suspicion that men, as political animals, are too immature to handle the problems created by their own aggregation. You have only to watch the windy statesmen of the world fumbling feebly and timorously with the nettle of disarmament to feel an uneasy conviction that "there's no deniging of it". You have only to think of Ireland to endorse a wistful wish that Mr. Lloyd George were a sage of about 285 summers.

The said Lloyd George, by the way, is murderously sketched into the panorama of "Back to Methuselah" under the thin disguise of Mr. Joyce Burge, nor does the supine Mr. Asquith fare much better under the unbecoming white overhead lighting of Shaw's contemplation. Their colloquy in the second part of the play—it is really a group of five plays on the one theme—is vastly entertaining in itself, yet after all they are but midges as compared with the protagonistic figures. After his success with Napoleon and C sar, it was doubtless only a question of time when Shaw would dramatize the first warrior. So Cain appears now upon his stage, a rather wobbly historical character wherein the author's dislike of him as a militarist is at obvious odds with his dislike of Abel as a meat-eater.

This first part of "Back to Methuselah", which introduces Adam and Eve and the Serpent that asked "Why not?", and which suggests how and why the human race acquired its unfortunate and insidious habit of dying, is a gorgeous piece of writing, with the tide of Shaw's invention running high and strong. Thereafter, by perceptible degrees, the play is progressively inferior, and the final scenes, which peer into the far future, are, like the similar adventures of Mr. Wells and Mr. Kipling, inanimate and a little dull, serving chiefly to content us with our own appointment on earth.

In 31920 A. D., the four-year-olds put romance and the nursery behind them at the same time and a good many engrossing and widespread human functions appear to have gone the way of the Neanderthal man and the duel. Indeed, the human body, which has always puzzled, annoyed, and offended Shaw, is on its last legs in his vision of the year 31920.

You had left Eve darkening Adam's day by this reflection: "If you were not a fool you would find something better for both of us to live by than this spinning and digging." And when he replied tartly that if she went without work, she would go without bread, she made the race's answer:

Man need not always live by bread alone. There is something else. We do not yet know what it is; but some day we shall find out; and then we will live on that alone; and there shall be no more digging nor spinning, nor fighting nor killing.

And now in 31920, the "something else" is in sight—in sight, at least, to the eyes of Lilith who, appropriately enough, has the last word. It is this:

Best of all, they are not satisfied; the impulse I gave them, in that day when I sundered myself in twain and launched Man and Woman on the earth, still urges them; after passing a million goals they press on to the goal of redemption from the flesh, to the vortex freed

from matter, to the whirlpool in pure intelligence that, when the world began, was a whirlpool in pure force. And though all that they have done seems but the first hour of the infinite work of creation, yet I will not supersede them until they have forded this last stream



G. B. S. Sketched by Horace Brodzky

that lies between flesh and spirit, and disentangled their life from the matter that has always mocked it. I can wait; waiting and patience mean nothing to the eternal. I gave the woman the greatest of gifts: curiosity. By that her seed has been saved from my wrath; for I also am curious; and I have waited all ways to see what they will do tomorrow. Let them feed that appetite well for me. I say, let them dread of all things, stagnation; for from the moment I, Lilith, lose hope and faith in them, they are doomed. In that hope and faith, I have let them live for a moment; and in that moment I have spared them many times. But mightier creatures than they have killed hope and faith, and perished from the earth; and I may not spare them forever. I am Lilith; I brought Life into the whirlpool of force, and compelled my enemy, Matter, to obey a living soul. But in enslaving Life's enemy, I made Life's master; for that is the end of all slavery; and now I shall see the slave set free and the enemy reconciled, the whirlpool become all life and no matter. And because these infants that call themselves ancients are reaching out towards that, I will have patience with them still; though I know well

that when they attain it they shall become one" with me and supersede me, and Lilith will be only a legend and a lay that has lost its meaning. Of Life there is no end; and though, of its million starry mansions many are empty and many still unbuilt, and though its vast domain is as yet unbearably desert, my seed shall one day fill it and master its matter to its uttermost confines. And for what may be beyond, the eyesight of Lilith is too short. It is enough that there is a beyond.

The Theatre Guild of New York is the gratified and somewhat embarrassed recipient of the manuscript of "Back to Methuselah". It would be staggeringly difficult to stage, none of it being obviously and easily detachable in the manner of its philosophic and artistic forerunner, the usually unacted third act of "Man and Superman". It might be presented in a series of three matinees with theatre-goers buying their tickets for all three as the Wagnerites solemnly undertake the "Ring".

If it ever is produced, it will be described in the public prints as impious, mischievous, garrulous, and undramatic. It is none of these. It has the same cleanliness, the same honesty, the same austerity, the same lively social conscience and the same genuine religious fervor as glorified "Heartbreak House", which play, doubtless to the considerable amusement of Lilith, was actually described by an adult reviewer in a New York newspaper as pernicious and flippant.

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Back to Methuselah. By Bernard Shaw.  
Brentano's.