

SECTION-I PROSE

I. HOW I BECAME A PUBLIC SPEAKER

GEORGE BERNARD SHAW

When I went with Lecky to the Zetetical meeting, I had never spoken in public. I knew nothing about public meetings or their order. I had an air of impudence, but was really an arrant coward, nervous and self-conscious to a heartbreaking degree. Yet I could not hold my tongue. I started up and said something in the debate, and then feeling that I had made a fool of myself, as in fact I had, I was so ashamed that I vowed I would join the Society; go every week; speak in every debate; and become a speaker or perish in the attempt. I carried out this resolution. I suffered agonies that no one suspected. During the speech of the debater I resolved to follow, my heart, used to beat as painfully as a recruit's going under fire for the first time. I could not use notes: when I looked at the paper in my hand I could not collect myself enough to decipher a word. And of the four or five points that were my pretext for this ghastly practice, I invariably forgot the best.

The Society must have hated me; for to it I seemed so uppish and self-possessed that at my third meeting I was asked to take the chair. I consented as offhandedly as if I were the Speaker of the House of Commons; and the Secretary probably got his first inkling of my hidden terror by seeing that my hand shook so, that I could hardly sign the minutes of the previous meeting. My speeches must have been little less dreaded by the Society than they were by myself; but I noticed that they were hardly ever ignored; for the speaker of the evening, in replying, usually addressed himself almost exclusively to my remarks, seldom in an appreciative vein. Besides, though ignorant of economics, I had read, in my boyhood, Mill of Liberty, on Representative Government, and on the Irish Land Question; and I was as full of Darwin, Tyndall, and George Eliot as most of my audience. Yet every subject struck my mind at an angle that produced reflections new to my audience. My first success was when the Society paid to Art, of which it was utterly ignorant, the tribute of setting an evening aside or a paper on it. I wiped the floor with that meeting; and several members confessed to me afterwards that it was this performance that first made them reconsider their first impression of me as a bumptious discordant idiot.

I persevered doggedly. I haunted all the meetings in London where debates followed lectures. I spoke in the streets, in the parks, at demonstrations, anywhere and everywhere possible. In short, I infested public meetings like an officer afflicted with cowardice, who takes every opportunity of going under fire to get over it and learn his business.

I had quiet literary evenings in University College at the meetings of the New Shakespeare Society under F.J. Furnivall, and breezier ones at his Browning Society. I joined another very interesting debating society called the Bedford, founded by Stopford Brooke, who had not then given up his pastorate at Bedford Chapel to devote himself to literature. At all these meetings I took part in the debates. My excessive nervousness soon wore off.

I soon became sufficiently known as a Socialist orator to have no further need to seek out public debates: I was myself sought after. This began when I accepted an invitation from a Radical Club at Woolwich to lecture to it. At first I thought of reading a written lecture; for it seemed hardly possible to speak for an hour without text when I had hitherto spoken for ten minutes or so only in debates. But if I were to lecture formally on Socialism for an hour, writing would be impossible for want of time: I must extemporize. The lecture was called Thieves, and was a demonstration that the proprietor of an unearned income inflicted on the community exactly the same injury as a burglar does. I spoke for an hour easily, and from that time always extemporized.

This went on for about twelve years, during which I sermonized on Socialism for at least three times a fortnight on an average. I preached whenever and wherever I was asked. It was first come first served with me: when I got an application for a lecture, I gave the applicant the first date I had vacant, whether it was for a street corner, a public-house parlour, a market place, the economic section of the British Association, the City Temple, a cellar or a drawing room. My audiences varied from tens to thousands. I expected opposition, but got hardly any.

One of my best speeches was delivered in Hyde Park in torrents of rain to six policemen sent to watch me, plus only the Secretary of the Society that had asked me to speak, who held an umbrella over me. I made up my mind to interest those policemen, though as they were on duty to listen to me, their usual practice, after being convinced that I was harmless, was to pay no further attention. I entertained them for more than an hour. I can still see their waterproof capes shining in the rain when I shut my eyes.

I never took payment for speaking. It often happened that provincial Sunday Societies offered me the usual ten guinea fee to give the usual sort of lecture, avoiding controversial politics and religion. I always replied that I never lectured on anything but very controversial politics and religion, and that my fee was the price of my railway ticket third class if the place was further off than I could afford to go at my own expense. The Sunday Society would then assure me that on these terms, I might lecture on anything I liked and how I liked. Occasionally, to avoid embarrassing other lecturers who lived by lecturing, the account was settled by a debit and credit entry: that is, I was credited with the usual fee and expenses, and gave it back as a donation to the Society. In this way I secured perfect freedom of speech, and was armed against the accusation of being a professional agitator. For instance, at the election of 1892, I was making a speech in the Town Hall of Dover when I was challenged by a hired professional agitator from London. I immediately offered to sell him my emoluments for £5. He hesitated and I came down to £4. I offered to make it five shillings - half-a-crown - a shilling - sixpence. When he would not deal even at a penny I claimed that he must know perfectly well that I was there at my own expense. If I had not been able to do this, the meeting, which was a difficult and hostile one, would probably have broken up.

Once, in St. James's Hall, London, at a meeting in favor of Women's Suffrage, I ventured on a curious trick with success. Just before I spoke, a hostile contingent entered the room; and I saw that we were outnumbered, and that an amendment would be carried against us. The intruders were all Socialists of the anti-Fabian persuasion, led by a man whom I knew very well, and who was at that time excitable almost to frenzy, worn out with public agitation and private worries. It occurred to me that if, instead of carrying an amendment, they could be goaded to break up the meeting and disgrace themselves, and the honours would remain with us. I made a speech that would have made a bishop swear or a sheep fight. The leader, stung beyond endurance, dashed madly to the platform to answer me. His followers, thinking he was leading a charge, instantly stormed the platform; broke up the meeting; and reconstituted it with their leader as chairman. I then demanded a hearing, which was duly granted to me as a matter of fair play; and I had another innings with great satisfaction to myself. No harm was done, nor any blow struck; but the papers next morning described a scene of violence and destruction that left nothing to be desired by the most sanguinary schoolboy.

My public speaking brought me a very necessary qualification for political work: the committee habit. Whatever Society I joined, I was immediately placed on the Executive Committee. At first I did what authors usually do in their Bohemian anarchism and individualism. When they are defeated on any issue they resign. I did this when the Land Restoration League refused to add Socialism to this program on my suggestion. I never did it again. I soon learnt the rule 'Never Resign'. I learnt also that committees of agitator are always unanimous in the conviction that 'Something Must Be Done', but

very vague as to what. They talk and talk and can come to no conclusion. The member who has something definite to propose, and who keeps it up his sleeve until the rest are completely bothered, is then master of the situation even when nobody quite agrees with him. It is that or nothing; and 'Something Must Be Done'. This is how a man in a minority of one becomes the leader. I was often in a minority of one.

How lack of committee training and platform technique disables even the most gifted thinkers was illustrated by the case of H. G. Wells, with whom I had a famous debate when he tried to capture the Fabian Society at one blow. As a speaker and a committee man I had the advantage of him by ten years. Whilst he was a complete novice. To say that I annihilated him is nothing; he saved me the trouble by annihilating himself. He could only misbehave himself. Fortunately for him he did this so outrageously at the Society very sensibly saw through the situation, and, whilst dismissing him as tactically impossible, thought none the worse of him as a Socialist pioneer, and none the better of me for my superiority as a platform artist.

I must not leave incipient orators to suppose that my technique as a speaker was acquired by practice alone. Practice only cured my nervousness, and accustomed me to speak to multitudes as well as to private persons. I practiced the alphabet as a singer practices scales until I was in no danger of saying 'Loheeryelentheethisharpointed sword' instead of 'Lo here I lend thee this sharp pointed sword'. Lessons in elocution should always be taken by public speakers when a phonetically competent teacher is available. But art must conceal its artificiality; and the old actor who professes to teach acting, and knows nothing of phonetic speech training, is to be avoided like the plague.

At last I could not deal with all the invitations received. And the repetition of the same figures and arguments became tiresome; I was in danger of becoming a windbag with only one speech. Thenceforth I orated on special occasions only, or at Fabian public meetings and in the St Pancras Borough Council, to which I got elected while it was still a Vestry. But I did not forget my acquired technique as a platform artist. It lasted until my final retirement from personal performances in 1941 - my eighty-fifth year.

COMPREHENSION:

Glossary:

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| 1. Zetetical meeting | - meeting conducted by the Zetetical Debating Society. |
| 2. impudence | - do not care for the consequences of action. |
| 3. offhandedly | - being cool in manner. |
| 4. bumptious - crude, self | - assertive. |
| 5. socialist | - a person, who strongly believes in socialism. |
| 6. extemporize | - speaking in public without preparation. |
| 7. sermonized | - talked on the moral aspects of the subject. |
| 8. embarrassing | - that which causes to feel awkward. |
| 9. professional agitator | - a person, who works (here speaks in public) as a part of his/her profession. |
| 10. hostile contingent | - a group of people, who opposed 'Women's Suffrage'. |
| 11. sanguinary | - involving or causing much bloodshed. |
| 12. incipient orators | - those who are trying to become effective public speakers. |
| 13. emoluments | - salary or fee. |

EXERCISES:

1. Classification of words

Classify the following words under the given heads:- **Noun, Verb, Adverb, Adjective.** impudence, inflicted, arrant, provincial, decipher, hostile, ghastly, persuasion exclusively, goaded appreciative, unanimous, utterly, disable, doggedly, novice, breezier, windbag

2. Answer the following questions in one sentence —

1. What made Shaw decide about delivering extempore speeches?
2. How did Shaw come out of his nervousness?
3. What resolution did Shaw carry out?
4. Where was Shaw's best speech delivered at?
5. What is important to become an effective public speaker?

3. Answer the following questions in 4-5 sentences —

1. Describe the incident of St. James Hall.
2. What does Shaw remember about his speech in Hyde Park?
3. Describe the incident which took place in the town hall of Dover.
4. How did Bernard Shaw secure perfect freedom of speech?

4. Answer the following questions in about 150 words —

1. How did Bernard Shaw become a public speaker?
2. Recount in your own words, Shaw's experiences as a public speaker.