

EMBOLDENED BY HIS BEARD

A Talk To Schoolboys By G. B. Shaw

A READER sends us this note with a copy of the English "Listener" of June 23, 1937: "You have printed Mr. Butler's White Paper on Education in England. Would you like to print a broadcast by G. B. Shaw on the same subject? It dates in time, but not, I think, in form or contents." We thank our reader, and reproduce the broadcast in full.

"HELLO, Sixth Forms! I have been asked to speak to you because I have become celebrated through my eminence in the Profession of Eschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Shakespeare. Eschylus wrote in school Greek; and Shakespeare is "English Literature," which is a school subject. In French schools I am English literature. Consequently, all the sixth forms



"I thought I was grown-up"—Bernard Shaw in his early twenties, his beard just appearing

in France shudder when they hear my name. However, do not be alarmed; I am not going to talk to you about English literature. To me there is nothing in writing a play: anyone can write one if he has the necessary natural turn for it; and if he hasn't, he can't; that is all there is to it.

However, I have another trick for imposing on the young. I am old: over 80 in fact. Also, I have a white beard; and these two facts are somehow associated in people's minds with wisdom. That is a mistake. If a person is a born fool, the folly will get worse, not better, by a long life's practice. Having lived four times as long as you gives me only one advantage over you. I have carried small boys and girls in my arms, and seen them grow into sixth form scholars, then into young men and women in the flower of youth and beauty, then into brides and bridegrooms who think one another much better and lovelier than they really are, then into middle-aged paterfamiliaes and anxious mothers with elderly spreads, and finally, I have attended their cremations.

Now you may not think much of this: but just consider. Some of your schoolfellows may surprise you by getting hanged. Others, of whom you may have the lowest opinion, will turn out to be geniuses, and become one of the great

men of your time. Therefore, always be nice to young people. Some little beast who is no good at games and whose head you may possibly have clouted for indulging a sarcastic wit and a sharp tongue at your expense, may grow into a tremendous swell, like Rudyard Kipling. You never can tell.

It is no use reading about such things or being told about them by your father. You must have known the people personally as I have. That is what makes a difference between your outlook on the world and mine. When I was as young as you, the world seemed to me to be unchangeable; and a year seemed a long time. Now the years fly past before I have time to look round. I am an old man before I have quite got out of the habit of thinking of myself as a boy.

You all think, don't you, that you are nearly grown up. I thought so when I was your age; and now, after 81 years of that expectation, I have not grown up yet. The same thing will happen to you. You will escape from school only to discover that the world is a bigger school, and that you are back again in the first form. Before you can work your way up into the sixth form again you will be as old as I am.

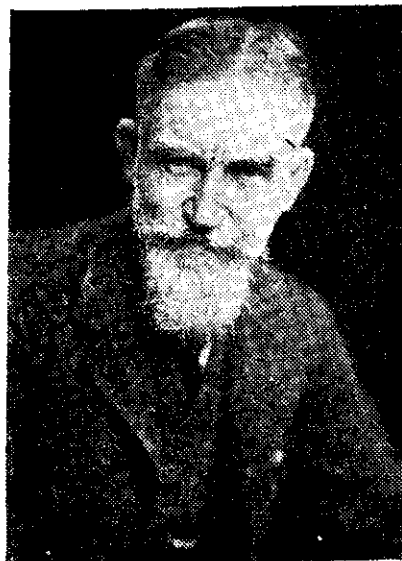
The Hardest Part of School: is fortunately the early part when you are a very small kid and have to be turned into a walking ready reckoner. You have to know up to 12 times 12, and how many shillings there are in any number of pence up to 144 without looking at a book. And you must understand a printed page just as you understand people talking to you. That is a stupendous feat of sheer learning: much the most difficult I have ever achieved: yet I have not the faintest recollection of being put through it, though I remember the governess who did it. I cannot remember any time at which a printed page was unintelligible to me nor at which I did not know without counting that 56 pence make four and eightpence. This seems so magical to me now that I sometimes regret that she did not teach me the whole table of logarithms and binomial theorem and all the other mathematical short cuts and ready reckonings as well. Perhaps she would have if she had known them herself. It is strange that if you learn anything when you are young you remember it forever.

What makes school life irksome until you get used to it, and easy when you do get used to it, is that it is a routine. You have to get up at a fixed hour, wash and dress, take your meals and do your work all at fixed hours. Now the worst of a routine is that though it is supposed to suit everybody, it really suits nobody. Sixth form scholars are like other people: they are all different. Each of you is what is called an individual case, needing individual attention. But you cannot have it at school. Nobody has time enough nor money enough to provide each of you with a

separate teacher and a special routine carefully fitted to your individual personality, like your clothes and your boots.

Change is Possible: I can remember a time when English people going to live in Germany were astonished to find that German boots were not divided into rights and lefts: a boot was a boot and it did not matter which foot you put it on, your foot had to make the best of it. You may think that funny; but let me ask how many of you have your socks knitted as rights and lefts? I have had mine knitted that way for the last 50 years. Some knitters of socks actually refuse my order and say that can't be done. Just think of that! We are able to make machines that can fly round the world and instruments that can talk round the world; yet we think we cannot knit socks as rights and lefts; and I am considered a queer sort of fellow because I want it done and insist that it can be done. Well, school routines are like the socks and the old German boots: they are neither rights nor lefts, and consequently, they don't fit any human being properly. But we have to manage with them somehow. And when we escape from school into the big adult world, we have to choose between a lot of routines: the college routine, the military routine, the naval routine, the court routine, the civil service routine, the legal routine, the clerical routine, the theatrical routine, or the parliamentary routine, which is the worst of the lot. To get properly stuck into one of these grooves you have to pass examinations; and this you must set about very clear-headedly or you will fail. You must not let yourself get interested in the subjects or be overwhelmed by the impossibility of anyone mastering them all even at the age of 500, much less 20. The scholar who knows everything is like the little child who is perfectly obedient and perfectly truthful: it doesn't exist and never will. Therefore, you must go to a crammer. Now

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