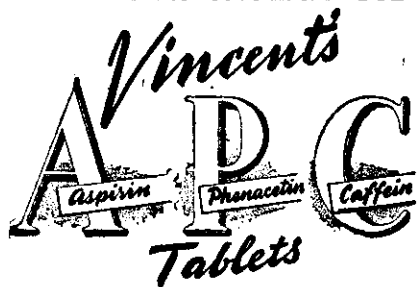


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THE RIDDLE OF THE UNIVERSE OR Bernard Shaw Knew It Too

OF the several operations I have endured in my time, the one from which I have just recovered was, in a way, the least interesting. It was done with the assistance of a new anaesthetic—which spared me those fantastic and terrifying adventures of the mind I'd always had beneath the chloroform mask. And yet, though I say it was less interesting, that is true only of the theatre episode. Afterwards, it became an occasion of fascinating discovery and speculation.

My first visitor was a good friend who had been through this kind of thing herself, and knew how to behave. She came in, if I remember correctly, chattering gaily to the nurse about the whole affair, as if it were a huge joke.

"Brought you some books, dearie," she said, and pulled a teasing face. "Haven't read one of them myself but Frank thought they'd be your kind of book." And when I had approved of her husband's thoughtful selection we got talking. It wasn't long before we were on that topic so dear to the victim of a surgical operation—his own experiences.

"But didn't they give you chloroform?"

"Not a whiff. I had an injection. Marvellous. You don't know a thing. I had some sort of preliminary jab in the arm an hour before, which they said would probably make me sleepy—but it didn't—and then I just rode in on the trolley in the usual way—and they put the old pink bedsocks on my feet, you know—and then a tough nurse with her sleeves rolled up, and a look as if she'd stand no nonsense, told me to climb on the table. Then I lay there and started shivering with fright as usual and someone said something about it being only a prick in the arm. I think they put some sort of strap round my wrist, then there was the prick, and the doctor said "Count." I thought: "Count yourself!" and went on shaking all over. But he said, "Come on, count out loud," so I started counting slowly. I only got to six, though. He said something about there being no need to breathe like that



Shaw also cried "Eureka!"

—I was heaving away the way I used to under chloroform to try and get it over quickly. When I got to about three I had a funny taste in my mouth. Then I think I got to six before I floated away. Perhaps I only think I did. At any rate I didn't go under bit by bit from the feet up the way you do with chloroform, and have horrible nightmares on the way."

The Riddle

My visitor suffered my loquacity with a sweet patience. But she seemed a little disappointed.

"Then you didn't solve the Riddle of the Universe?"

"The Riddle of the Universe?" I said, and sat up a little. "What makes you say that?" My tone was the tone of interest and surprise, because in fact I did know something about the Riddle from a previous operation. But I wanted to know what my visitor knew first.

"My dear," she said, "didn't you dream you were just going to solve the Riddle of the Universe when they put you under? Didn't you see the Ultimate Truth wrapped in a silver ball, coming nearer and nearer, and just as you were going to snatch it—poof! out you went?"

I was delighted by this speech. At last, I thought, here was someone I could talk to, one other who would understand the Secret of my Soul. I tried to prop myself up on my elbows. A jolt of pain made me sink back. I sighed, and accepted the necessity of telling my tale on the flat of my back.

"Astonishing you should say that," I said. "I had no idea anyone else had these experiences. Nothing happened this time, but I once dreamt I saw the doctor who was supposed to be giving my anaesthetic, on the clothes line on our back lawn—it was right through him, starting at his navel. He was riding backwards and forwards on it, banging the post at one end, then banging the trellis at the other, and going faster and faster. Mother must have left the prop on the ground. And he was talking, and his voice got unbearably loud and he started racing, faster, and faster. And he was going to melt like the tigers that turned into butter in Little Black Sambo, and I knew that when that happened I was going to know *Everything*. I was going to know *Why*. Oh, but it was dreadful;

the moment never came. Instead I just woke up feeling awful and started being sick.

What Time Was

"Then the last time I had chloroform I was a red-hot ball-bearing between two enormous plates about as thick as the world and as wide as from here to the moon, both going round and round like butter pats, and I realised that I almost knew what Time was. I was going to defeat Time, and control it. A small piece of Time was being taken right out of my life, so that it would be in two parts for ever afterwards, slightly different, like two scales in a Vernier, and I would be able to compare these two slightly different specimens of Time, and after that I would always know the answer to everything."

My loquacity was still endured with a good humour. My visitor knew that I would get excited and develop a temperance if she tried to interrupt and add to my story. In spite of my morphia, I perceived this forbearance. But it was curiosity, and not courtesy that made me say:

"And you've had these experiences too, have you?"

"Indeed I have. I told you, I saw the Ultimate Truth coming towards me wrapped in a silver ball, and just as I was going to take it, away I went. One of the nurses told me people sometimes start shouting 'I've found it—I've got it' and so on."

I can hardly say how deeply affected I was by these revelations. When my visitor had gone, I began to Believe in



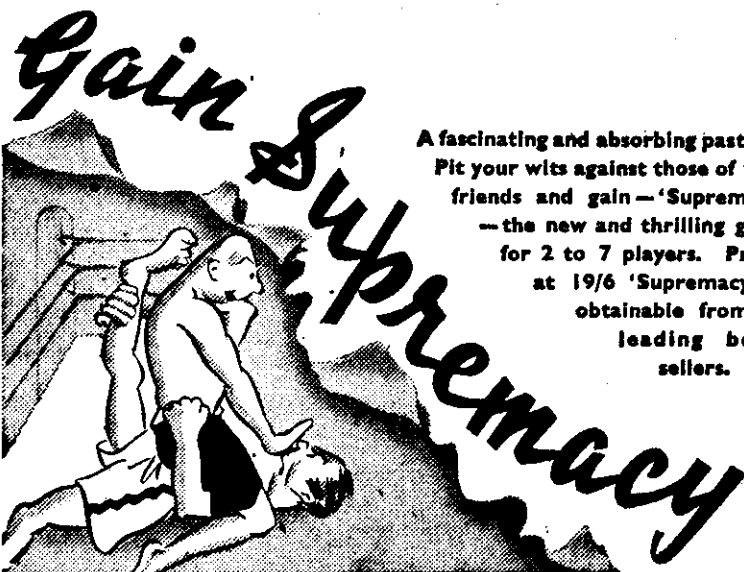
"He was riding backwards and forwards"

Myself. My whole person relaxed, and my mind soothed itself with contemplation of harmonies of the soul hitherto unheard of. The light blue screen by my bed became a brilliant summer sky; the pale green walls became a calm sea; and the plaster ceiling became beautiful cumulus clouds across the ocean. The bedclothes were shining sand, and I was lying there by the sea at peace with the whole world

Shaw in the Theatre

Next day I was fit to read. I picked up one of my books. It was Volume 11 of Bernard Shaw's Collected Dramatic

(continued on next page)



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