

THE WIFE OF G. B. SHAW

She Almost Married The Wrong Man

A CABLE message a few days ago announced the death in England of Charlotte Frances Shaw — the wife of Bernard Shaw. Since even those who saw her when she accompanied her famous husband on a short visit to New Zealand in 1934 sometimes find it difficult to imagine the venerable playwright, critic, philosopher, and wit as a married man, we reprint some extracts from a recent biography of Shaw, showing how he came to be one.

The biography is by Hesketh Pearson, and it has only recently been on the shelves of New Zealand booksellers. Pearson describes the first meetings between Shaw, a bachelor in his 'forties, living on a precarious £6 a week, and Charlotte Frances Payne-Townshend, a wealthy, independent woman, who had been born with a social conscience, had become tired of "social" life, and had joined the Fabian Society. They met while spending the summer holidays with the Sidney Webbs in 1896, and from here we can take up the narrative in Shaw's own words, quoted first from letters to Ellen Terry:

"A Comfort to Me"

"Shall I marry my Irish millionaire? She . . . believes in freedom, and not in marriage, but I think I could prevail on her; and then I should have ever so many hundreds a month for nothing . . . she doesn't really love me. The truth is, she is a clever woman. She knows the value of her unencumbered independence . . . the idea of tying herself up again by a marriage before she knows anything — before she has exploited her freedom and money power to the utmost—seems to her intellect to be unbearably foolish. Her theory is that she won't do it. She picked up a broken heart somewhere a few years ago and made the most of it (she is very sentimental), until she happened to read *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in which she found, as she thought, gospel, salvation, freedom, emancipation, self-respect, and so on. Later on, she met the author, who is, as you know, able to make himself a tolerable correspondent. He is also a bearable companion on bicycle rides, especially in a country house, where there is nobody else to pair with. She got fond of me and did not coquet or pretend that she wasn't. I got fond of her because she was a comfort to me down there."

"A Lady-Like Person"

Shaw thus described her to Ellen Terry: "She is, normally, a lady-like

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"One-and-six," snarled Mr. Georgetti. I dropped another threepence and fled.

I ENJOYED my fish-and-chips. The best fish-and-chips I can remember having eaten. But the cat merely sniffed at the fish-heads and walked away. And I heard her muttering something about a stalled ox and a dinner of herbs. Strange, because she is not normally interested in herbs.

person at whom nobody would ever look twice, so perfectly does she fit into her place . . . perfectly placid and proper and pleasant . . . she is not cheap enough to be brought round to your room and shewn to you. She is not an appendage, this green-eyed one, but an individual."

By the beginning of 1898, Miss Payne-Townshend had become Shaw's secretary, and in March she started off on a tour of the world with the Webbs but had only got as far as Rome when Shaw's friend, Graham Wallas, telegraphed that Shaw was seriously ill, and lying neglected in disagreeable surroundings at 29 Fitzroy Square. Miss Payne-Townshend returned at once, and began to nurse him back to health.

She took a house near Haslemere, proposing to install him there. His mother raised no objection; but Shaw realised that with Queen Victoria still on the throne, a spinster living in a house with a bachelor, even though nurses were present to prove his invalidism, would gravely compromise herself. Familiar as he was with illicit unions, he had never advised a woman to form one; and to allow Charlotte to lose her social status on his account was impossible to him. For one who felt as he did, it was, therefore, marriage and Haslemere, or an illness at Fitzroy Square without Charlotte. There was not much doubt as to the form the ceremony should take.

"If I were to get married myself," he had written a few weeks before the arrival of Miss Payne-Townshend, "I should resort to some country where the marriage law is somewhat less than five centuries out of date."

In 1896 he had written: "If, for example, I desire to follow a good old custom by pledging my love to my wife in the church of our parish, why should I be denied due record in the registers unless she submits to have a moment of deep feeling made ridiculous by the reading aloud of the naive impertinences of St. Peter, who, on the subject of Woman, was neither Catholic nor Christian, but a boorish Syrian fisherman."

The Wedding Ceremony

Miss Payne-Townshend therefore bought a ring and a licence, and on June 1, 1898, they were married en route for Haslemere at the West Strand Registry office.

Shaw wore an old jacket which had been reduced to rags by the crutches on which he hobbled about (an abscess on his foot had aggravated his general ill-health). His friends, Graham Wallas and Henry Salt, were present, both immaculately dressed.

"The registrar never imagined that I could possibly be the bridegroom," related Shaw. "He took me for the inevitable beggar who completes all wedding processions. Wallas, over six feet tall, was so obviously the hero of the occasion that the registrar was on the point of marrying him to my betrothed. But Wallas, thinking the formula rather too strong for a mere witness, hesitated at the last moment, and left the prize to me."

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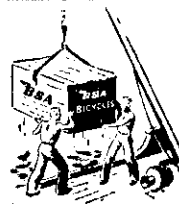
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