Farewell, Victoria!

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 Unlike his contemporary, H. G. Wells, Bernard Shaw rarely took flights into prophecy. His most significant efforts in that genre would come much later, in the fantasies and prophecies of *Back to Methuselah* (1921), *The Apple Cart* (1929), *The Simpleton of the Unexpected Isles* (1934), and *Farfetched Fables* (1948). In some ways, all of his late plays were prophecies. In 1889, however, he was under the influence of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1887) when in the guise of a dream-vision he drafted a remarkable political get-out-the-vote appeal for a London County Council election. He was not running for office himself, but had spoken at a meeting of the Social Democratic Federation in Islington in support of its candidates. Two years later he was invited to stand for Parliament from Battersea, across the Thames, as a Socialist candidate, and begged off. He could not afford the time and the expense in a certain losing effort. In 1897, he did run for Vestryman, afterward Borough Councillor, for the London district of St. Pancras, and won the seat, then lost his bid four years later to represent St. Pancras in the London County Council to George Alexander, actor in and director of Oscar Wilde’s comedies.

Some strikingly futuristic elements in “A. D. 3,000” suggest Shaw’s later plays—the long-lived Londoners; the new mechanical means of locomotion, from moving sidewalks to flying machines; vacuum cleaners; a telephone equipped with television screen (which precipitates an embarrassingly amusing moment in *Back to Methuselah*). There is even a foreshadowing of the phonetician Henry Higgins of *Pygmalion*.

“It was nearly 17,” Shaw wrote in his diary for 14 January 1889, “when I got to work on an article, A County Councillor’s Dream, for the double number of The Star on Thursday. After the meeting I walked to Portland Rd. With [H. M.] Hyndman. Wrote a few letters when I got home.” The
dream-vision also written then was framed in matter-of-fact simplicity, to convey verisimilitude.

Written in a single sitting, the pre-Wellsian experiment in fiction, not collected by Shaw afterwards in *Short Stories, Scraps and Shavings* (1932) for his *Collected Edition*, appeared in the *Star* for Thursday, 17 January 1889, the day of the actual County Council election. In the text below, obvious typographical errors typical of newspaper texts are silently corrected. The original publication in the afternoon *Star* was anonymous.

A.D. 3,000. The True Report of a County Council Candidate’s Dream

[BERNARD SHAW]

I felt sure of being returned [to office] when I got to bed at last after addressing four meetings in the course of the day. My chief opponent is only a workman, and as the division for which I am standing is inhabited chiefly by men of his own class, he has not the slightest chance against me; for I am a member of the Board of Works, and an old Vestryman.

No sooner had I blown out the candle and committed my head to the pillow than I began to imagine myself delivering speeches about what the new County Council would do for the people. The darkness swam with faces, but instead of listening they shifted in all directions like bubbles, in soda water. I was still hard at work trying to make myself heard when I suddenly found myself in full sunshine on a handsome bridge in the middle of a splendid city. Something about the general hang of the place and the course of the broad river seemed familiar to me; and yet I could not quite make up my mind about it.

At first it seemed that nobody was about, but presently a colored man, with a tattooed face, *quite the gentleman, though*, turned away from the balustrade and asked me politely whether I could point out which was St. Paul’s. Taken aback by the question, I instinctively turned to the northeast shore, and there, sure enough, the first thing I saw was unmistakably the Monument [to the Great Fire]; but I recognized nothing else except the slope of Fish-street-hill. As for St. Paul’s, there was not a sign of it. I looked rather foolish, and told him that it must have been pulled down.

“But the ruins, sir,” says he; “where are the ruins?” I looked again, but could only say as pleasantly as possible, “They don’t keep ruins here, I am afraid.” He seemed annoyed, and slipped the elastic band abruptly on a sketch book he had taken out. “I thank you,” says he; “these Whig historians are not to be depended on,” and he turned away. But just as he was half-
way round, his heels went as if he had trod upon a piece of ice, and down he came smash on the back of his head.

I was hurrying to give him a lift up when, to my astonishment, his body was drawn along the ground, as if invisible horses were harnessed to it, and had vanished into Gracechurch-street (so to speak) before I recovered my presence of mind—for you may be sure my hair was standing on end at this piece of Spiritualism in Broad Daylight. I would have taken to my heels, but I could not get the County Council out of my head even then, and the fear of being seen running through the streets by some of my constituents helped me to keep up my dignity.

As I walked away, I noticed that there was a magnificent embankment all along the north and south sides. The water in the river was so clear that I could see the bottom covered with grey-blue pebbles. There were heaps of goldfish and things. But what surprised me most was to see several people in jerseys in the water, swimming. I soon saw that they were not bathing, like boys do at Millbank, but just going from one side to the other, for all the world as if they were crossing a street. When they got out, they ran up the steps and shook themselves like a dog, and went off without thinking of a towel or as much as a handkerchief. Some of them walked along the embankment like any ordinary person out walking; but others stooped until I could only see their heads over the wall, and shot off like mad at about 30 miles an hour.

At last one of them came up on the bridge at the south end, and I put my dignity in my pocket and was about to make a bolt for the north, when four appeared there. I was fairly in it this time, so I strolled along towards the four as if nothing was the matter. First I thought they were men. Two of them wore plain grey jerseys and pants; the other two wore cinnamon color tunics about as long as a cut-away morning coat, and their pants had a sort of fringe along where the stripe would be down a pair of trousers. They had no collars nor cuffs, and they all wore wide-awake hats. The colors and materials were fine, but I couldn’t make out exactly what they were. But what was my horror and blushes when we came closer, to see that the two in the tunics were young women, as unconcerned as you please.

They none of them looked fat, healthy and strong—not to my notions of health at least; but they were very fine drawn and cultivated looking, as it were; and in spite of the brazen get-up of the women, I felt sheepish before them. They all carried something like a campstool in their hands. Suddenly they went over to the pathway, opened their campstools, sat down with a little hop and a twist, and I thought I should have dropped, streamed off along the bridge just as the tattooed man had done when he fell; only, when they were passing me, they all stared and then rose, caught up their stools,
and came to a stand with a little jump to one side, like as it were getting off a tramcar without stopping it.

Then I saw the whole secret. The footpath was in motion, like a belt over two wheels, and it was a mercy I had not stepped on it without knowing and perhaps broken my neck. But with these four people coming at me I had no time to think of patent street improvements. I grabbed my umbrella fast; but somehow they were not the sort of people you could offer to fight exactly.

They had low, quiet, impressive, and high-class sort of voices, though not a word could I understand. I didn’t half like their manners; they made too free considering they were strangers; and all the same they were uppish, as if they thought themselves as good as me.

By this time the person I had seen at the other end of the bridge had slid up to us. He was in a brown jersey, and I took him for a man of 50. He was reading as the pavement carried him along; but when he looked up he got off, and seemed twice as curious as the others. “Well, ladies and gentlemen,” says I, “I’m sure I hope you’ll know me again.”

“Sir,” says the old fellow, in a finicking way, “you speak like a phonograph. You are evidently a perfect master of old English vernacular. I am a professor of our obsolete national dialects. Your costume is historically accurate, and even your person reproduces with singular fidelity the bloated and somewhat unpleasant type common to the 19th century.”

“You might be aware, perhaps,” I said stiffly, “that I am a candidate for the London County Council.”

“That is curious,” he says, as cool as you please; “for anyone can perceive without the trouble of exact anthropometric measurement, that you are neither intelligent nor trustworthy.”

I didn’t say anything, but I just gave him a look to teach him his place. Then I made a jump and got on to the pavement, which carried me off at a fearful pace. He was after me like a shot, and I was glad to catch hold of him to keep from falling.

“At my age I generally go on the slow track,” he said, steadying me politely enough. “Only our very young people care to go so fast; I have not done so myself since I turned 70.”

“Why, you don’t look more than 50,” I says.

“I am 98,” he replied. “Nineteenth century ghosts always mistake our age.”

“Do you call me a ghost?” I said indignantly.

“Come,” says he quietly: “do you call yourself a contemporary?”

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That shut me up. “Whatever I am,” I says, “I may as well make myself at home. Is there any place about here where we could have a snack of fish and a glass of—Halloe! Stop thief! Stop thief!”

It was a young fellow that had just reached his hand into a shop window full of magnificent fruit, and taken a bunch of grapes like hen’s eggs. There was no one in the shop; and he took them and walked away as coolly as if the whole place belonged to him.

“My good sir,” says old Ninety-eight, stopping me, “I think I know what you mean. In your time a citizen was not allowed to take what he wanted without depositing a metal token, which was received by an official, who weighed out a certain portion of the desired commodity in return for it. We cannot afford to waste our time on such cumbrous forms. We do our day’s work and take what we want. As a guest of the City you are also welcome. Pray take what you please.”

“Me steal!” I says. “No!” I says. “Thieving is thieving, whatever your time may be worth. I’ll die honest. I’ll have a bunch, but I’ll pay for it like a man.” And I planked down half-a-crown, and took up about half-a-dozen big grapes.

“Do you not require this any more?” he says, looking covetously at the half-crown. “Of course not,” I said, “It belongs to the shop now—not to me.”

“Very good of you, I’m sure,” he says, pocketing it with a face of brass. “If it is genuine it will form a valuable addition to our museum.”

This was too much. “If it’s genuine!” I says. “Damn your impudence; do you know who I am? I might have known by your uniform that I was among the criminal classes. Where are the respectable people?”

“Well, there are only three ghosts at present in London—or four, counting you. Two of them claim, I believe, to be respectable. The other, a female, allows her hair to grow down to the small of her back, dresses in a ridiculous and indecent fashion, and is curiously useless and helpless. She lays great stress on her respectability. Had you not better step into this store and steal—since you prefer that expression—something less noticeable to wear. The people we pass are too considerate to stare now that you are under my wing, but we are attracting a great deal of attention.”

“I wish I could find a policeman,” I said, gruffly.

“We have four at the British Museum,” he said; “but one of them has been half eaten by rats.”

“Eaten by rats!” I exclaimed, getting a dreadful turn.
“Yes; they stuffed him with some tasty substance, I suppose. If you wish to see them we can do so by photophone\(^1\) at the Ludgate-hill panopticon; or we can get to the Museum in four seconds by pneumatic tube.”

“May I ask you whether those four policemen are under the control of the County Council?”

“No; they are under the control of the trustees of the British Museum. Before we go into the laboratory you had better have a brush down. That singular garment of yours—made of wool adulterated with cotton, if I judge rightly—is full of dust. May I ask why the stiff black cylinder on your head has a flange? The white-tubes on your wrists and neck have no such appliance.”

“They are a mark of caste, sir,” I said haughtily, as I followed through the hall of a splendid club-house into a room where there was a treadmill—as I thought—turning very fast. On a second look it turned out to be a huge brush. My companion went up and held himself against it as coolly as if he was a cat, and it the cook’s skirt. I tried it rather gingerly, and found there was a draught to take the dust down; but it was too penetrating for the stuff I wore, and I soon had enough.

“How do you work it?” I asked, wishing to show an intelligent curiosity after his late remarks. “Steam or electricity?”

“We don’t call it anything particular,” he said. “We store it in accumulators, which we fill from windmills, tidemills, watermills, and superfluous energy cranks, in our gymnasia. In the old days a good deal of it was produced by a noisy arrangement worked by audiences at theatres, public meetings, and so on when they wished to applaud; but we are not so demonstrative now. We still find that five out of every six men use more force in pushing open a swing door than is necessary to let them through, and this we store. We export millions of foot-pounds of it. It works everything—the drums on which the trottoirs\(^2\) revolve, the flying machines—everything. You see very little of its effects here; for, of course, London, lying so low, is a mere village. All our big cities are on the tops of the hills and ridges. The flying machine led inevitably to that.”

“If you call this only a village, you must have pretty high ideas of good living,” I said, staring at him to see whether he was in earnest.

“The less developed of us find time hanging heavy on hand. They keep pulling down the buildings for the mere sake of putting them up again, so that you do not recognise a town if you have been away for a week. One man—he was quite an idiot, hardly three grades higher than you—actually tried to revive one of the antique handicrafts. He made an obsolete instrument called a saw. But he cut his finger off and, of course, died.”
“Died of losing a finger!”

“Certainly. We are not lizards or lobsters; you cannot dismember so highly organised a creature as man without killing him. This is the laboratory.”

It was a splendid place; but such an examination I never underwent in all my born days. He said they were weighing and measuring me, but though I went into places where I was shut in and let out again, I saw no scales and no standards. They nearly made me ill, putting things on my tongue that had no more taste than sawdust. They showed me dozens of stuffs, all of the same silly grey color, and asked me which was which. One joker wanted to question me in mental arithmetic, but I wouldn’t stand that.

I don’t remember half their dodges; but at last Ninety-eight says: “I have noticed that you do not like to be spoken to about your own powers. You will be able to understand—at least we think you can with a little effort—that how we determine a man’s capacity is no more a matter of opinion than his weight or stature. Personalities, as you would call them, are therefore never resented among us. However, as we are therefore still apt to be pleased when our points are exceptional, you will be glad to learn that in order to estimate you we have had to fall back on the instruments used with the anthropoid apes. Your color blindness, your obtuseness of palate, your insensibility to stimuli, and your sloth in responding to those coarse enough to be felt by you, your incapacity for dealing with abstract conceptions, your egotism, your love of notoriety, your greediness, your dulness, your complacent imbecility, your superstition, and, in short, your stupidity, are prodigious and unique.”

“Do you mean to say that I am not a fit person to act on the County Council?” I said, getting very red—as I felt—in the face.

“Beyond a doubt you are not a fit person to sit even on a coroner’s jury,” he replied.

My conviction of the truth of what he said was that deep that I walked out, made straight for the bridge, and chucked myself right over. Instead of finding myself in the water, I found myself on the floor of my room, where I had fallen slap out of bed. The relief of finding that it wasn’t true was beyond all description. Not to revive the Metropolitan Board of Works, would I dream it again, though my seat there was worth two thousand a year to me one way or another.

I hope I shall get in at the top of the poll to-day; but I don’t feel so sure as I did. The dream has taken the pluck out of me.