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# Back to Methuselah on a Beefsteak

By H. E. Bates

Like Mr. Shaw I am no pilot, though I belong to the R.A.F. Like Mr. Shaw again, I am a writer. But unlike Mr. Shaw I am not a vegetarian and at my present age, 37, I am not likely to qualify for that accomplishment, though you never can tell. The fact is I don't want to be either a pilot or a vegetarian. I don't even want to be Mr. Shaw. I want to be a writer.

Now Time will decide, eventually, what places in literature Mr. Shaw and I will occupy: not whether Mr. Shaw will go forward to Tokyo, by which of course he means immortality, on buttermilk, or whether I shall go back to Methuselah, by which of course I mean posterity, on a beefsteak; but whether or not we were, in fact, good writers. To achieve our ends both of us need, as Mr. Shaw so well points out, a plentiful and stimulating diet, and Mr. Shaw's idea of a plentiful and stimulating diet, it seems, is red currant jam. It isn't a pilot's idea and it isn't mine. But then, of course, Mr. Shaw is extremely crafty. He doesn't really care two hoots about red currant jam. What he really wants, as he has wanted it for the past 86 years, is a revolution. And what better chance of that, you English dumb-clucks, than if you were to put R.A.F. pilots on red currant jam to-morrow? The red currents, you see, in the scheme of things.

We meat-eating writers, in Mr. Shaw's view, do not seem to live for a very long time. Dickens, it is true, died at sixty; but he managed to write *Pickwick Papers* before he was twenty-five, at which age Mr. Shaw was, in a literary way, in short pants. Keats died before he was thirty; but managed to write *Adonais* before he died. Tchekhov was just over forty when he died; but he succeeded in writing half a dozen plays which Mr. Shaw, on his own confession, would have given his beard to write. Chaucer died at sixty; but wrote the *Canterbury Tales*. Shakespeare, too, died young, but before doing so—but then, everybody by this time knows that Mr. Shaw himself wrote Shakespeare.

It is in fact not when you die, or what you eat and drink before you die, but what you do before you die that matters. Some men eat beef and write *Hamlet*; some eat sturgeon and write *The Cherry Orchard*. Some eat red currant jam and write, if it doesn't surprise you, *The Doctor's Dilemma*.

Mr. Shaw, in fact, wants jam on it. He not only wants to be an Irishman and the author of *Saint Joan*, which ought to be enough for any man, but he wants to teach pilots the best stomach on which to fly Stirlings. To Tokyo, he says, on red currants; or to Germany, if you prefer it, on gooseberries. I should know, he says, that flak is dangerous. And so, he should know, is belly-ache at altitudes.

Now I am a beefsteak writer myself and am fond of the gravy and onions of life, and almost the only thing I regret about that life and about myself as a writer is the fact that I have never met Mr. Shaw. I should in fact very much like to meet Mr. Shaw. And what I would like to do if I did meet him is to take him to see pilots eating. We would go to a south coast station, and Mr. Shaw could have lunch in the Mess there. We would lunch with pilots who fought at Dieppe and who might, indeed, be fighting over France again that same afternoon. Mr. Shaw could choose his lunch from four or five salads, stewed fruits, melba toast, cheese and, if he really liked, red currant jam.

And while we were eating I should tell a story. It could be one of the many stories about Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Mr. Shaw. For it seems that Mr. Shaw was once rehearsing a play of his, with Mrs. Patrick Campbell and Sir Herbert Tree in the cast. Said Tree to Mrs. Campbell, referring to Shaw, "Let's take him to lunch and give him a beefsteak."

Said Mrs. Campbell to Tree, "No, for Heaven's sake! He is bad enough as it is; but give him a beefsteak and no woman in England will be safe."