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An Unsocial Socialist

by George Bernard Shaw

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CHAPTER I

In the dusk of an October evening, a sensible looking woman of forty came out through an oaken door to a broad landing on the first floor of an old English country-house. A braid of her hair had fallen forward as if she had been stooping over book or pen; and she stood for a moment to smooth it, and to gaze contemplatively--not in the least sentimentally--through the tall, narrow window. The sun was setting, but its glories were at the other side of the house; for this window looked eastward, where the landscape of sheepwalks and pasture land was sobering at the approach of darkness.

The lady, like one to whom silence and quiet were luxuries, lingered on the landing for some time. Then she turned towards another door, on which was inscribed, in white letters, Class Room No. 6. Arrested by a whispering above, she paused in the doorway, and looked up the stairs along a broad smooth handrail that swept round in an unbroken curve at each landing, forming an inclined plane from the top to the bottom of the house.

A young voice, apparently mimicking someone, now came from above, saying,

"We will take the Etudes de la Velocite next, if you please, ladies."

Immediately a girl in a holland dress shot down through space; whirled round the curve with a fearless centrifugal toss of her ankle; and vanished into the darkness beneath. She was followed by a stately girl in green, intently holding her breath as she flew; and also by a large young woman in black, with her lower lip grasped between her teeth, and her fine brown eyes protruding with excitement. Her passage created a miniature tempest which disarranged anew the hair of the lady on the landing, who waited in breathless alarm until two light shocks and a thump announced that the aerial voyagers had landed safely in the hall.

"Oh law!" exclaimed the voice that had spoken before. "Here's Susan."

"It's a mercy your neck ain't broken," replied some palpitating female. "I'll tell of you this time, Miss Wylie; indeed I will. And you, too, Miss Carpenter: I wonder at you not to have more sense at your age and with your size! Miss Wilson can't help hearing when you come down with a thump like that. You shake the whole house."

Oh bother!" said Miss Wylie. "The Lady Abbess takes good care to shut out all the noise we make. Let us--"

"Girls," said the lady above, calling down quietly, but with ominous distinctness.

Silence and utter confusion ensued. Then came a reply, in a tone of honeyed sweetness, from Miss Wylie:

"Did you call us, DEAR Miss Wilson?"

"Yes. Come up here, if you please, all three."

There was some hesitation among them, each offering the other precedence. At last they went up slowly, in the order, though not at all in the manner, of their flying descent; followed Miss Wilson into the class-room; and stood in a row before her, illumined through three western windows with a glow of ruddy orange light. Miss Carpenter, the largest of the three, was red and confused. Her arms hung by her sides, her fingers twisting the folds of her dress. Miss Gertrude Lindsay, in pale sea-green, had a small head, delicate complexion, and pearly teeth. She stood erect, with an expression of cold distaste for reproof of any sort. The holland dress of the third offender had changed from yellow to white as she passed from the gray eastern twilight on the staircase into the warm western glow in the room. Her face had a bright olive tone, and seemed to have a golden mica in its composition. Her eyes and hair were hazel-nut color; and her teeth, the upper row

of which she displayed freely, were like fine Portland stone, and sloped outward enough to have spoiled her mouth, had they not been supported by a rich under lip, and a finely curved, impudent chin. Her half cajoling, half mocking air, and her ready smile, were difficult to confront with severity; and Miss Wilson knew it; for she would not look at her even when attracted by a convulsive start and an angry side glance from Miss Lindsay, who had just been indented between the ribs by a finger tip.

"You are aware that you have broken the rules," said Miss Wilson quietly.

"We didn't intend to. We really did not," said the girl in holland, coaxingly.

"Pray what was your intention then, Miss Wylie?"

Miss Wylie unexpectedly treated this as a smart repartee instead of a rebuke. She sent up a strange little scream, which exploded in a cascade of laughter.

"Pray be silent, Agatha," said Miss Wilson severely. Agatha looked contrite. Miss Wilson turned hastily to the eldest of the three, and continued:

"I am especially surprised at you, Miss Carpenter. Since you have no desire to keep faith with me by upholding the rules, of which you are quite old enough to understand the necessity, I shall not trouble you with reproaches, or appeals to which I am now convinced that you would not respond," (here Miss Carpenter, with an inarticulate protest, burst into tears); "but you should at least think of the danger into which your juniors are led by your childishness. How should you feel if Agatha had broken her neck?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Agatha, putting her hand quickly to her neck.

"I didn't think there was any danger," said Miss Carpenter, struggling with her tears. "Agatha has done it so oft--oh dear! you have torn me." Miss Wylie had pulled at her schoolfellow's skirt, and pulled too hard.

"Miss Wylie," said Miss Wilson, flushing slightly, "I must ask you to leave the room."

"Oh, no," exclaimed Agatha, clasping her hands in distress. "Please don't, dear Miss Wilson. I am so sorry. I beg your pardon."

"Since you will not do what I ask, I must go myself," said Miss Wilson sternly. "Come with me to my study," she added to the two other girls. "If you attempt to follow, Miss Wylie, I shall regard it as an intrusion."

"But I will go away if you wish it. I didn't mean to diso--"

"I shall not trouble you now. Come, girls."

The three went out; and Miss Wylie, left behind in disgrace, made a surpassing grimace at Miss Lindsay, who glanced back at her. When she was alone, her vivacity subsided. She went slowly to the window, and gazed disparagingly at the landscape. Once, when a sound of voices above reached her, her eyes brightened, and her ready lip moved; but the next silent moment she relapsed into moody indifference, which was not relieved until her two companions, looking very serious, re-entered.

"Well," she said gaily, "has moral force been applied? Are you going to the Recording Angel?"

"Hush, Agatha," said Miss Carpenter. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"No, but you ought, you goose. A nice row you have got me into!"

"It was your own fault. You tore my dress."

"Yes, when you were blurting out that I sometimes slide down the banisters."

"Oh!" said Miss Carpenter slowly, as if this reason had not occurred to her before. "Was that why you pulled me?"

"Dear me! It has actually dawned upon you. You are a most awfully silly girl, Jane. What did the Lady Abbess say?"

Miss Carpenter again gave her tears way, and could not reply.

"She is disgusted with us, and no wonder," said Miss Lindsay.

"She said it was all your fault," sobbed Miss Carpenter.

"Well, never mind, dear," said Agatha soothingly. "Put it in the Recording Angel."

"I won't write a word in the Recording Angel unless you do so first," said Miss Lindsay angrily. "You are more in fault than we are."

"Certainly, my dear," replied Agatha. "A whole page, if you wish."

"I b-believe you LIKE writing in the Recording Angel," said Miss Carpenter spitefully.

"Yes, Jane. It is the best fun the place affords."

"It may be fun to you," said Miss Lindsay sharply; "but it is not very creditable to me, as Miss Wilson said just now, to take a prize in moral science and then have to write down that I don't know how to behave myself. Besides, I do not like to be told that I am ill-bred!"

Agatha laughed. "What a deep old thing she is! She knows all our weaknesses, and stabs at us through them. Catch her telling me, or Jane there, that we are ill-bred!"

"I don't understand you," said Miss Lindsay, haughtily.

"Of course not. That's because you don't know as much moral science as I, though I never took a prize in it."

"You never took a prize in anything," said Miss Carpenter.

"And I hope I never shall," said Agatha. "I would as soon scramble for hot pennies in the snow, like the street boys, as scramble to see who can answer most questions. Dr. Watts is enough moral science for me. Now for the Recording Angel."

She went to a shelf and took down a heavy quarto, bound in black leather, and inscribed, in red letters, MY FAULTS. This she threw irreverently on a desk, and tossed its pages over until she came to one only partly covered with manuscript confessions.

"For a wonder," she said, "here are two entries that are not mine. Sarah Gerram! What has she been confessing?"

"Don't read it," said Miss Lindsay quickly. "You know that it is the most dishonorable thing any of us can do."

"Poch! Our little sins are not worth making such a fuss about. I always like to have my entries read: it makes me feel like an author; and so in Christian duty I always read other people's. Listen to poor Sarah's tale of guilt. '1st October. I am very sorry that I slapped Miss Chambers in the lavatory this morning, and knocked out one of her teeth. This was very wicked; but it was coming out by itself; and she has forgiven me because a new one will come in its place; and she was only pretending when she said she swallowed it. Sarah Gerram.'"

"Little fool!" said Miss Lindsay. "The idea of our having to record in the same book with brats like that!"

"Here is a touching revelation. '4th October. Helen Plantagenet is deeply grieved to have to confess that I took the first place in algebra yesterday unfairly. Miss Lindsay prompted me;' and--"

"Oh!" exclaimed Miss Lindsay, reddening. "That is how she thanks me for prompting her, is it? How dare she confess my faults in the Recording Angel?"

"Serves you right for prompting her," said Miss Carpenter. "She was always a double-faced cat; and you ought to have known better."

"Oh, I assure you it was not for her sake that I did it," replied Miss Lindsay. "It was to prevent that Jackson girl from getting first place. I don't like Helen Plantagenet; but at least she is a lady.'

"Stuff, Gertrude," said Agatha, with a touch of earnestness. "One would think, to hear you talk, that your grandmother was a cook. Don't be such a snob."

"Miss Wylie," said Gertrude, becoming scarlet: "you are very--oh! oh! Stop Ag--oh! I will tell Miss--oh!" Agatha had inserted a steely finger between her ribs, and was tickling her unendurably.

"Sh-sh-sh," whispered Miss Carpenter anxiously. "The door is open."

"Am I Miss Wylie?" demanded Agatha, relentlessly continuing the torture. "Am I very--whatever you were going to say? Am I? am I? am I?"

"No, no," gasped Gertrude, shrinking into a chair, almost in hysterics. "You are very unkind, Agatha. You have hurt me."

"You deserve it. If you ever get sulky with me again, or call me Miss Wylie, I will kill you. I will tickle the soles of your feet with a feather," (Miss Lindsay shuddered, and hid her feet beneath the chair) "until your hair turns white. And now, if you are truly repentant, come and record."

"You must record first. It was all your fault."

"But I am the youngest," said Agatha.

"Well, then," said Gertrude, afraid to press the point, but determined not to record first, "let Jane Carpenter begin. She is the eldest."

"Oh, of course," said Jane, with whimpering irony. "Let Jane do all the nasty things first. I think it's very hard. You fancy that Jane is a fool; but she isn't."

"You are certainly not such a fool as you look, Jane," said Agatha gravely. "But I will record first, if you like."

"No, you shan't," cried Jane, snatching the pen from her. "I am the eldest; and I won't be put out of my place."

She dipped the pen in the ink resolutely, and prepared to write. Then she paused; considered; looked bewildered; and at last appealed piteously to Agatha.

"What shall I write?" she said. "You know how to write things down; and I don't."

"First put the date," said Agatha.

"To be sure," said Jane, writing it quickly. "I forgot that. Well?"

"Now write, I am very sorry that Miss Wilson saw me when I slid down the banisters this evening. Jane Carpenter."

"Is that all?"

"That's all: unless you wish to add something of your own composition."

"I hope it's all right," said Jane, looking suspiciously at Agatha. "However, there can't be any harm in it; for it's the simple truth. Anyhow, if you are playing one of your jokes on me, you are a nasty mean thing, and I don't care. Now, Gertrude, it's your turn. Please look at mine, and see whether the spelling is right."

"It is not my business to teach you to spell," said Gertrude, taking the pen. And, while Jane was murmuring at her churlishness, she wrote in a bold hand:

"I have broken the rules by sliding down the banisters to-day with Miss Carpenter and Miss Wylie. Miss Wylie went first."

"You wretch!" exclaimed Agatha, reading over her shoulder. "And your father is an admiral!"

"I think it is only fair," said Miss Lindsay, quailing, but assuming the tone of a moralist. "It is perfectly true."

"All my money was made in trade," said Agatha; "but I should be ashamed to save myself by shifting blame to your aristocratic shoulders. You pitiful thing! Here: give me the pen."

"I will strike it out if you wish; but I think "

"No: it shall stay there to witness against you. How see how I confess my faults." And she wrote, in a fine, rapid hand:

"This evening Gertrude Lindsay and Jane Carpenter met me at the top of the stairs, and said they wanted to slide down the banisters and would do it if I went first. I told them that it was against the rules, but they said that did not matter; and as they are older than I am, I allowed myself to be persuaded, and did."

"What do you think of that?" said Agatha, displaying the page.

They read it, and protested clamorously.

"It is perfectly true," said Agatha, solemnly.

"It's beastly mean," said Jane energetically. "The idea of your finding fault with Gertrude, and then going and being twice as bad yourself! I never heard of such a thing in my life."

"'Thus bad begins; but worse remains behind,' as the Standard Elocutionist says," said Agatha, adding another

sentence to her confession.

"But it was all my fault. Also I was rude to Miss Wilson, and refused to leave the room when she bade me. I was not wilfully wrong except in sliding down the banisters. I am so fond of a slide that I could not resist the temptation."

"Be warned by me, Agatha," said Jane impressively. "If you write cheeky things in that book, you will be expelled."

"Indeed!" replied Agatha significantly. "Wait until Miss Wilson sees what you have written."

"Gertrude," cried Jane, with sudden misgiving, "has she made me write anything improper? Agatha, do tell me if--"

Here a gong sounded; and the three girls simultaneously exclaimed "Grub!" and rushed from the room.