

Sir Edward Grey

By G. Bernard Shaw

Sir Edward Grey's interview, which furnishes Mr. Bernard Shaw's text for the following article, was published simultaneously in The New York Times and The Chicago Daily News on May 14 of this year.

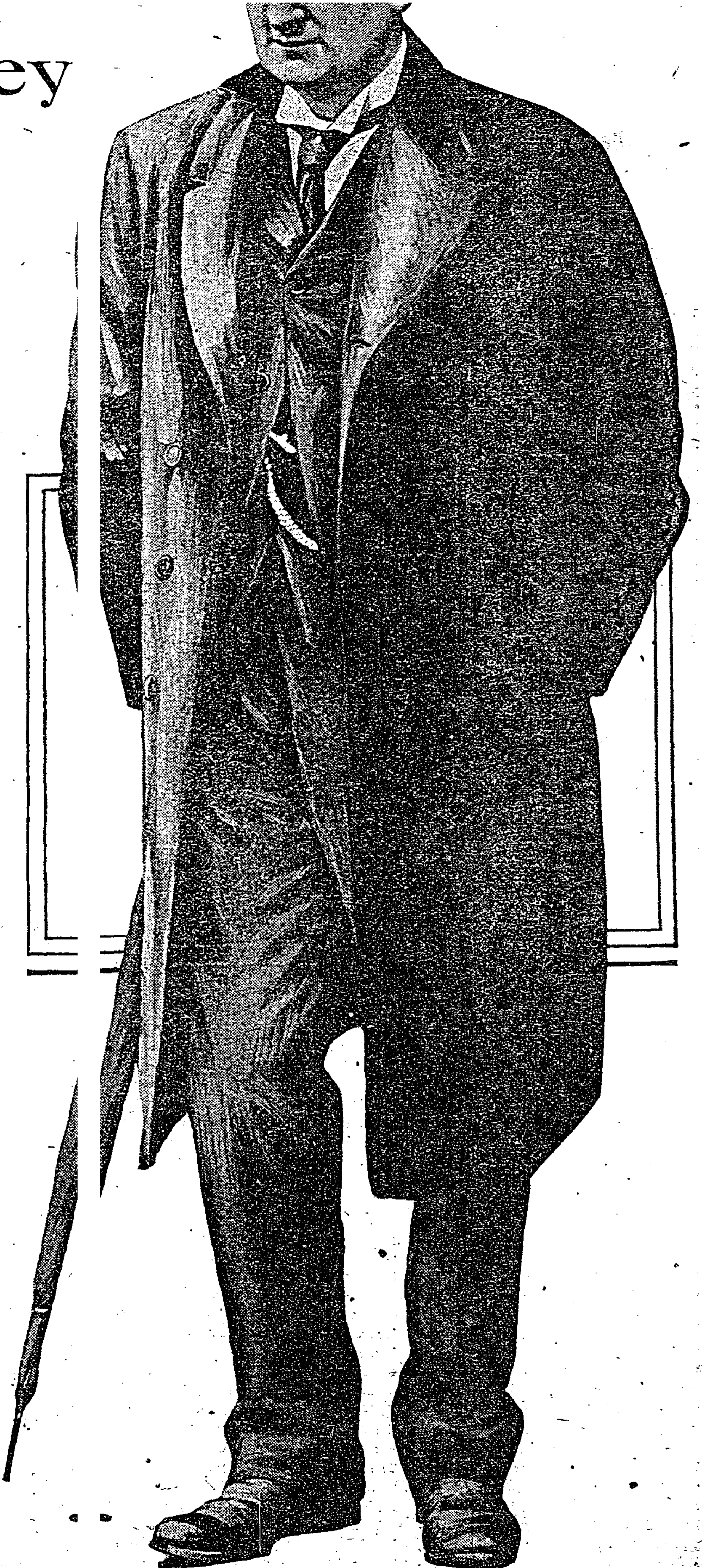
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THE interview accorded by our Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs to The Chicago Daily News, and authorized for reproduction in the British press, is alarming, because its apparent date is August, 1914. Now, if Sir Edward Grey has not advanced a step since that distressful month, when everybody was talking a great deal of nonsense, and Sir Edward was contributing his full share of it, the prospect is disquieting. For it must not be forgotten that in spite of all British discussions as to the terms on which England will sheathe the sword, as Mr. Asquith puts it, and all the declarations of London journalists that they will insist on this, and die rather than suffer that, and fight to the last man and the last penny and the last drop of our blood for the other, yet what will actually happen is that one day Sir Edward Grey will come down to the House of Commons and inform it that he has just signed a treaty and that if England does not like it she can lump it. That was the procedure when Britannia went to war. That was the procedure when she bound herself not to stop fighting until her allies have had enough. And as that will be the procedure when all the belligerents have had enough, it seems rather silly for persons not in the Foreign Office to be excitedly writing and haranguing as if they were going to have any finger in Sir Edward Grey's pie. It cannot be too clearly understood that, for the ending of the war as for its beginning, England is entirely in the hands of her Foreign Office, and that as long as Sir Edward Grey remains Foreign Secretary her interests, her honor, and, indeed, the future of Europe, as far as her diplomatic action can affect it, are absolutely at the mercy of Sir Edward's capacity and character.

This is a serious responsibility; and on the most favorable estimate of Sir Edward's genius the British Empire will be taking more chances than can be heartily enjoyed by any one but a confirmed gambler or a fanatical devotee of British junker government. That is why it is so startling to read, in an utterance of his which must be presumed to be as closely up to date as any utterance during war time can be, assumptions, and statements which have dropped out of currency among serious students of the war since public opinion began to steady itself toward the middle of 1915.

Sir Edward, it appears, is still going to negotiate on the assumption that he is engaged in a crusade against certain sentences written by Treitschke, for which the German Government and the German Nation are no more responsible (having mostly never read them) than the British Nation and the British Government are responsible for precisely similar sentences written by General Butler and other English militarist writers. And if the Imperial Chancellor should take it into his head to negotiate on the assumption that Germany is engaged in a crusade against Lord Roberts's British "will to conquer" and his aspiration to save the world by bringing it under the rule of gentlemen educated in the public schools of England, we can imagine what sort of understanding is likely to be reached on these lines, and how long it will take to reach it.

Sir Edward is still under the impression that when Belgium appealed to Germany, France, and Britain for a pledge that her neutrality would be respected, Germany refused it and Britain and France gave it. This delusion may have helped out our recruiting at a moment when recruiting was the supreme consideration; but now that we have compulsory military service, and can afford to employ 200,000 soldiers as officers' valets, and are therefore sure of as many men in the army as we can prudently spare from civil industry, it is no longer necessary to resort to such expedients. The truth is, as Sir Edward can easily ascertain from his own



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White Papers, that each of the three powers consented to respect the neutrality of Belgium only on condition that the other two did so as well, which meant in effect on condition that the war did not occur. We must look this Belgian question straight in the face. The independence of Belgium is as much out of the question as the independence of Ireland, and always has been since she was set up as a buffer State between the great powers of the west of Europe. Unless and until Belgium can be placed under the protection of a supernational organization stronger than any of the national powers or their militant alliances, Belgium must fulfill her present destiny of being, as both Sir Edward and the Imperial Chancellor quite accurately call her, "a bulwark" for England and France against Germany. England is our castle; but Belgium is its barbican; and we cannot allow Belgium to surrender the barbican, nor can we hesitate, if she cannot hold it against Germany, to throw in our troops and defend it as if it were Portsmouth, no matter how vigorously Belgium may protest.

That is our position and also the French position; and everybody in Europe knows it except the subscribers to the London one-cent illustrated dailies. Sir Edward and his colleagues secured popular support at the beginning of the war by holding up the neutrality of Belgium as something so sacred that only the very vilest of Huns would raise a weapon against it or march a regiment across a Belgian field. I ventured to differ with Sir Edward to the extent of saying that if our own military success were at stake we would violate the neutrality of heaven itself rather than give a German soldier half a chance of setting his foot in a Kentish lane; and what has happened in Greece has shown that I was precisely right, even to the very instance I gave of the landlocked country (Serbia) which might put us to the test.

Now, Sir Edward, according to the Chicago interview, has not come around to my opinion. He still insists that Germany must come to judgment on the neutrality question, even at the cost of giving away our own position in Greece as morally indefensible. Fortunately I, having in 1914 heroically resisted the temptation to use The Hague Conference and the 1879 treaty as a stick to beat Germany with, am now able to say without making myself publicly ridiculous, that military necessity justified Britain in seizing the Greek islands and in claiming a right of way for her ally Serbia over the Greek railway through Athens, and to repeat that the German attack on France, a quite unnecessary breach of the peace of Western Europe, is the true Achilles heel of Germany's moral position. My fear is that any plenipotentiary of ours who goes into this difficult business with his judgment obscured and his attention distracted by pious horror at the short work which war makes of the moral recriminations of the military pot and the military kettle, will have no chance against the German statesmen, who, though apparently no cleverer than our own, yet secure a considerable economy of discussion and directness of aim by hacking their way through moral humbug, and discarding, for European as distinguished from domestic consumption, the Pecksniffian airs which impose on nobody outside their own constituencies, and only on the stupid and ignorant inside them.

The point is of cardinal importance because, I repeat, we cannot be too clear about the Belgian question. Our position is that until the present military basis of international relations is underpinned by a basis of supernational law, Belgium must be independent of Germany. The German position is that

Belgium must be independent of France and Britain. What both belligerents really mean is that Belgium, though nominally independent of them, and indeed really so in peace, must in war side with one or the other of them; and naturally each desires the power of compelling her to side with it against the other. Now if this difference is to be settled by the belligerents only, it must be settled by blood and iron and not by Christmas cards and governesses' lectures. Germany being in possession of Belgium, and therefore in a position to say, with Wagner's dragon, "Ich liege und besitze," Britain must drive Germany out by fighting her or starving her. And Germany must hold Belgium tooth and nail against us to the utmost effort short of suicide she is capable of.

There is, however, a possible alternative. If the so-called neutral countries were to step in for the sake of putting an end to the intolerable situation that will arise (if it has not already arisen) from the establishment of a deadlock on the western front in which, though both sides may keep feeding in fresh drafts of men to be slaughtered every year, neither can shift the other, and were to make Belgium really independent both of Britain, France, and Germany by themselves combining to guarantee her soil against invasion, the belligerents would eagerly accept the guarantee the moment they became convinced that they were engaged in a Kilkenny cat fight; for both sides could claim to have achieved the independence of Belgium by a chivalrous feat of arms.

The initiative in such an intervention should come from America. A month ago Britain had bright hopes of America coming in on her side. Those hopes have been shot away by General Maxwell in Ireland for the present; and in spite of the powerful war interests which exist in America, and which were revealed to London by well-circulated reports of the action of Mr. Tavenner in Congress last December, London and Washington are now back at the point reached in 1914, when I appealed through the press to President Wilson to come to the rescue of Belgium, and incidentally of the peace and order of Europe, by interfering on her behalf in the name of outraged humanity, without waiting for any specifically American grievance or leaning to either the British or the German side. Now that the Lusitania case is settled, the United States is again in the strong moral position of having no axe of her own to grind nor wrongs of her own to avenge. And I still believe that she must settle the Belgian question by moral force if neither the British nor the Germans can settle it by force of arms. Indeed, she ought to settle it anyhow in the interests of civilization; but as things are I must not pretend that the belligerents would unanimously welcome her interference if either saw its way to a victory that it could afford. The Imperial Chancellor is right when he says that there can be no status quo ante; but the substitution of a guarantee of Belgium by the comparatively disinterested powers for the present guarantee by powers who guarantee her only to have a grip on her throat would not be the status quo ante; and an acceptance of it would be a concession to the public opinion of the civilized world and not to the threats of a foe in arms. Sir Edward Grey's reply to the Chancellor that without the status quo ante "Belgium's independence is gone, as Serbia's and Montenegro's is gone, unless the Allies can get them up again," will not stand half an hour's consideration. The world, let us hope, is not yet so completely bankrupt that nothing good can be done unless the Allies do it.

When Sir Edward forgets that he is Foreign Secretary and remembers only his political idealism he speaks like a man in a trance, the world forgetting, but

unfortunately not by the world forgot. No doubt he is quite right in advising the Germans to make a revolution. The Germans not only gave the same advice to the Irish, but contributed rifles and ammunition as well. For that matter, there is not a country in the civilized world that would not be the better for a revolution once a fortnight or so. But I confess I wish Sir Edward would not call himself "we" when he is speaking for himself and his dreams alone, and is ignoring the most glaring facts of the situation. It would not matter if, like so many of our patriotic tub thumpers, his words traveled no further than the circulations of a cheap illustrated paper, or the walls of a public hall in England, or the railings of a London park. But Sir Edward, like myself, is quoted throughout Europe and America; and he should be more careful than I am, because he is the uncontrolled agent of Britain's foreign policy, instead of which he recklessly says things that would destroy my credit forever.

We all know that he was not prepared for war, because he never is prepared for anything that actually happens in the crude concrete world, even when it is thundering down on him like a mad motor bus; but when, in the teeth of the assurances of the British Admiralty and the British War Office, through his own Ministerial colleagues, that the command in Flanders was settled five years before the war began and that the British commander was studying the field during that period, and that the navy was fully prepared with five years' accumulation of ammunition, not to mention the fact that it would have been grossly dishonorable and criminally negligent of Britain if, after her understanding with France, she had neglected these precautions, Sir Edward declares that "we" were not prepared for war, the impression he produces on Europe is that the Machiavellian Grey of the German imagination answers to the reality. Again, when he says that "poisonous fumes were rejected by us as too horrible for civilized people to use," the amazed foreigner asks whether the British Foreign Secretary can really be unaware that Britain hastened to use them the moment the Germans demonstrated their practicability.

Surely, the foreigner thinks, Britain should blame herself for letting the Germans anticipate her lazy conservatism, as in the case of the Zeppelins, rather than plume herself on an affected humanity, of which war can know less and less until science reduces it to impossibility.

As to Sir Edward's fine old Whig dreams of nationalism and political freedom, and his "We want a Europe free," "France, Russia, and Italy are in the war to preserve everything that is precious to nationality," what effect must they produce on the neutral world, to say nothing of our highly critical enemies, when they see that national independence is now an impracticable superstition, and that France in Morocco, Italy in Dalmatia, and Russia in Poland are no more aiming at freedom and national independence than Austria in Bohemia, Germany in Posen and Schleswig-Holstein, Britain in Egypt, India, or Ireland, or the United States (if they are wise) in Mexico? What sense is there in saying these things now to a world which can see nothing in them but the celebrated British hypocrisy which The London Times confesses and defends with affectionate pride as the homage Englishmen pay to virtue, and at a moment, too, when every ear is strained to catch the words of the autocrat of our Foreign Office.

And, oh! will Sir Edward never forgive or forget that rude omission of the Central Empires to come and talk it over quietly with him when the fat was in the fire, and every moment's delay, if there was to be a war, was adding an ounce to the weight of the threatening Russian steam roller? The Balkan difficulty proved how soothing the conversation of Sir Edward can be to men who do not mean to fight; but when their minds changed, and they were prepared to fight in certain contingencies, all Europe

shrieked to Sir Edward Grey that straight question as to whether in these contingencies he was going to fight or not. Professor Gilbert Murray had written a most conclusive book, with all the quotations from Sir Edward in italics, proving that he replied that peace was the immediate jewel of England's soul. When popular pugnacity revolted against this view, Mr. William Archer wrote another book proving up to the hilt that Sir Edward had, on the contrary, thrown his blood-stained sword in thunder down, and left no possible doubt as to our bellicose intentions. In short, Sir Edward having thought it best to shilly-shally, one of his two ablest literary friends collected all the shilly and the other all the shally, leaving the world to judge what the Germans were likely to have made of it when the one chance of averting war was to convince them bluntly that if they took on the French Republic they would have to take on the British Empire too.

It may be that this was good statesmanship and that it was better to lure Germany to her doom and have it out with her once and for all. Or it may be that if the Germans had accepted that invitation to confer Sir Edward would have soothed them, and we should now all be taking our stalls for Bayreuth and our circular tickets for the Black Forest. But what is the use of going back to all that now? The Germans did not walk into Sir Edward's parlor; and by this time his obsession with their unkindness has worn out its interest. The Allies have now either to win the war or at least prevent Germany from winning it; and the old moralizings and recriminations of 1914 will not help us—will, in fact, hinder us most dangerously if our statesmen keep chewing them over instead of tackling the problem in front of them and dealing with it in terms of the strictest objectivity. Sir Edward's column and a half of assurances that the English are the natural administrators of divine justice and that the Germans must be classed with "footpads, safe-breakers, burglars, and incendiaries," will not put a single German gun out of action, and may strain the patience of the neutrals with British self-love and their faith in British statesmanship to the point of doubting whether any material advantages can secure success to a side which talks like that, not only under the first shock of war, but after nearly two years' reflection.

As I write these words the world is all discussing Sir Edward Grey's very latest utterance. The Imperial Chancellor has said that Sir Edward threatened war when Austria violated the treaty of Berlin by practically annexing Bosnia. The obvious reply to that was, "The Imperial Chancellor has paid me a compliment I do not deserve." The reply actually made by Sir Edward is, "That is a first-class lie." This is a very typical sample of Sir Edward's temper and manners. When Turkey threw in her lot with Germany in the war the Foreign Office announced that fact in a document which described our former protégés as "the degenerate Turks." And the Foreign Office would probably have been just as rude if it could have foreseen Gallipoli and Kut. Apparently it has not character enough to observe even the scrupulous civilities of a common duel, much less a conflict of empires. What likelihood is there of any negotiations turning out happily if this is the style in which they are to be conducted? Already the Chancellor has been able to compel Mr. Asquith to climb down by saying, "If you take that tone, negotiations will be concluded before they have been begun." Yet Mr. Asquith was not personally offensive; and readily explained when the remonstrance came to hand. Sir Edward Grey has thrown in the Chancellor's face a personal insult for which, according to the Continental code, he ought to offer "satisfaction," (with pistols.) We may have an extra month of war because Sir Edward has lost his temper.

As long ago as 1906, in referring to a very horrible episode in the history of our occupation of Egypt, I expressed my opinion that Sir Edward Grey was unfitted by his character and the limitations of his capacity for the highly specialized work of a Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. Nothing that has happened since has shaken that opinion of mine for a moment. I wonder whether I am alone in believing that his self-transfer to a more suitable department would be the greatest service it is in his power to render to his much perplexed country.