

QUALITY

John Galsworthy

*John Galsworthy (1867-1933), educated at Horrow, began to write at the age of twenty-eight for his own amusement. He considered **The Island Pharisees** (1904) was his first important work. As a novelist Galsworthy is chiefly known for his **The Forsyte Saga**. He wrote a considerable number of novels, short stories, and plays. His works often deal with specific social grievances such as the double standard of justice as applied to the upper and lower classes.*



A. Think Before you read

Can a shoemaker be called an artist? Yes, if he has the same skill and pride in his trade as any other artist, and the same respect for it too. Mr. Gessler, a German shoemaker settled in London, is a perfect artist. Read this story and see how he devotes his life to his art.

I knew him from the days of my extreme youth, because he made my father's boots; inhabiting with his elder brother two little shops let into one, in a small by-street, now no more, but then most fashionably placed in the West End.¹

The shop had a certain quiet distinction. There was no sign upon its face other than his own name of Gessler Brothers; and in the window a few pairs of boots. He made only what was ordered, and it seemed so

inconceivable that only what he made could ever have failed to fit. I was promoted to him at the age of fourteen. To make boots—such boots as he made—seemed to me then, and still seems to me, mysterious and wonderful.

I remember well my shy remarks one day, while stretching out to him my youthful foot. “Isn’t it awfully hard to do, Mr Gessler?” And his answer, given with a sudden smile from out of the redness of his beard: “Id is an Ardt!”²

It was not possible to go to him very often—his boots lasted terribly, having something beyond the temporary—some, as it were, essence of boot stitched into them.

One went in, not as into most shops, in the mood of “Please serve me and let me go!” but restfully, as one enters a church, and sitting on the single wooden chair, waited—for there was never anybody there. Soon, over the top edge of that sort of well—rather dark and smelling soothingly of leather—which formed the shop, there would be seen his face, or that of his elder brother, peering down. A guttural³ sound, and the tip-tap of his slippers beating the narrow wooden stairs and he would stand before one without coat, a little bent, in leather apron, with sleeves turned back, blinking—as if awakened from some dream of boots, or like an owl surprised in daylight and annoyed at this interruption.

And I would say: “How do you do, Mr Gessler? Could you make me a pair of Russian leather boots?”

Without a word he would leave me retiring whence he came, or into the other portion of the shop, and I would continue to rest in the wooden chair inhaling the incense of his trade. Soon he would come back, holding in his thin veined hand a piece of gold-brown leather. With eyes fixed on it he would remark; “What a beautiful biece!.”⁴ When I too had admired it, he would speak again. “When do you wand dem?”⁵ And

I would answer: "Oh! As soon as you conveniently can." And he would say; "Tomorrow fordnight?"⁶ Or if he were his elder brother: "I will ask my brudder."⁷

Then I would murmur; "Thank you! Good morning, Mr Gessler." "Good morning!" he would reply, still looking at the leather in his hand. And as I moved to the door, I would hear the tip-tap of his slippers restoring him up the stairs, to his dream of boots.

I cannot forget that day on which I had occasion to say to him; "Mr. Gessler, that last pair of boots creaked, you know."

He looked at me for a time without replying, as if expecting me to withdraw or qualify the statement, then said; "Id shouldn'd've greaked."⁸

"It did, I'm afraid."

"You god dem wed before dey found demselves."⁹ "I don't think so."

"At that he lowered his eyes, as if hunting for memory of those boots and I felt sorry I had mentioned this grave thing."

"Zend dem back," he said; "I will look at dem."¹⁰

"Zome boods," he continued slowly, "are bad from birdt. If I can do noding wid dem off your bill."¹¹

Once (once only) I went absent-mindedly into his shop in a pair of boots bought in an emergency at some large firm. He took my order without showing me any leather and I could feel his eyes penetrating the inferior covering of my foot. At last he said:

"Dose are nod my boods."¹²

The tone was not one of anger, nor of sorrow, not even of contempt, but there was in it something quiet that froze the blood. He

put his hand down and pressed a finger on the place where the left boot endeavouring to be fashionable, was not quite comfortable.

"Id urds you dere," he said: "Dose big virms ave no self-respect."¹³ And then, as if something had given way within him, he spoke long and bitterly. It was the only time I ever heard him discuss the conditions and hardships of his trade.

"Dey get it all," he said, "Dey get id by advertisement, nod by work, Dey take id away from us, who lofe our boods. Id gomes to dis-bresently I haf no work. Every year it gets less. You will see. And looking at his lined face I saw things I had never noticed before, bitter things and bitter struggle—and what a lot of grey hairs there seemed suddenly in his red beard !

As best I could, I explained the circumstances of those ill-omened boots. But his face and voice made so deep an impression that during the next few minutes I ordered many pairs. They lasted more terribly than ever. And I was not able conscientiously to go to him for nearly two years.

When at last I went I was surprised to find that outside one of the two little windows of his shop another name was painted, also that of a bootmaker. And it was longer than usual, too, before a face peered down, and the tip-tap of slippers began. At last he stood before me and gazing through those rusty iron spectacles, said: Mr. —, isn'd it?"¹⁵ Ah! Mr. Gessler," I stammered, "but your boots are really too good, you know! See, these are quite decent still !" and I stretched out to him my foot. He looked at it.

"Yes," he said, "people do nod wand good boods, id seems."¹⁶ To get away from his reproachful eyes and voice I hastily remarked "What have you done to your shop?"

He answered quietly: "Id was too exbensif. Do you wand some boods?" 17

I ordered three pairs, though I had only wanted two, and quickly left.

It was many months before my next visit to his shop. This time it appeared to be his elder brother, handling a piece of leather.

"Well, Mr. Gessler," I said, "how are you?" He came close, and peered at me. "I am breddy well," he said slowly, "but my elder brudder is dead." 18

And I saw that it was indeed himself — but how aged and wan ! And never before had I heard him mention his brother. Much shocked, I murmured: "Oh ! I am sorry!"

"Yes," he answered, "he was a good man, he made a good bood¹⁹ but he is dead." and he touched the top of his head, where the hair had suddenly gone as thin as it had been on that of his poor brother, to indicate, I suppose, the cause of his death. "Do you wand any boods ?" ²⁰ And he held up the leather in his hand. "Id's a beautiful biece." ²¹

I ordered several pairs. It was very long before they came — but they were better than ever. One simply could not wear them out. And soon after that I went abroad.

It was over a year before I was again in London. And the first shop I went to was my old friend's. I had left a man of sixty; I came back to one of seventy-five, pinched and worn, who genuinely, this time, did not at first know me.

"Do you wand any boods?" he said. "I can make dem quickly; id is a slack dime." ²²

I answered: "Please, please! I want boots all around-every kind!"

I had given those boots up when one evening they came. One by one I tried them on. In shape and fit, in finish and quality of leather they were the best he had ever made. I flew downstairs, wrote a cheque and posted it at once with my own hand.

A week later, passing the little street, I thought I would go in and tell him how splendidly the new boots fitted. But when I came to where his shop had been, his name was gone.

I went in very much disturbed. In the shop, there was a young man with an English face.

"Mr Gessler in?" I said.

"No sir," he said. "No, but we can attend to anything with pleasure. We've taken the shop over."

"Yes, yes," I said "but Mr Gessler?"

Oh! he answered, dead, "Dead! But I only received these boots from him last Wednesday week."

"Ah!" he said; "poor old man starved himself." "Good God!"

"Slow -starvation, the doctor called it! You see he went to work in such a way! Would keep the shop on; wouldn't have a soul touch his boots except himself. When he got an order, it took him such a time. People won't wait. He lost everybody. And there he'd sit, going on and on — I will say that for him — not a man in London made a better boot. But look at the competition! He never advertised! Would have the best leather too, and do it all himself. Well there it is. What could you expect with his ideas?"

"But starvation — !"

"That may be a bit flowery, as the saying is — but I know myself he was sitting over his boots day and night, to the very last. You see, I

used to watch him. Never gave himself time to eat; never had a penny in the house. All went in rent and leather. How he lived so long I don't know. He regularly let his fire go out. He was a character. But he made good boots."

"Yes," I said, "he made good boots."

Exercises



Let's Discuss

1. Who was Mr. Gessler? How did the author know him?
2. What was the author's opinion about Mr. Gessler as a shoe maker?
3. The work style of Mr. Gessler was unique. Explain.
4. Mr. Gessler was not successful in his trade. Why?
5. Big firms are selling their products and making hold on the market through advertisement, offers and big shows. Low scaled and skilled artists are being out of trade. How? Give your own opinion with reference to the lesson "Quality".
6. Suppose, you are one of the customers of Mr. Gessler's shop. You know how Mr. Gessler struggles for the existence of his trade. What will you suggest to protect the trade from the onslaught of big firms?
7. The story of Mr Gessler is the story of the struggle of an individual artist against industrialisation that threatens to devour individual artist and trades man. Explain.

Let's Do

Do a project work on the trade, economic condition and social status of low scaled shoe makers in your locality.

End notes:

1. West End: A fashionable section in the western part of London.
2. It is an art.
3. Harsh and grating.
4. What a beautiful piece!
5. When do you want them?
6. Fortnight.
7. Brother.
8. It should not have cracked.
9. You got them wet before found themselves.
10. Send them back, he said: I will look at them.
11. Some boots are bad from birth. If can do nothing with them off your bill.
12. Those are not my boots.
13. It hurts you there. Those big films have no self respect.
14. They get it all. They get it by advertisement not by work. They take it away from us, who love our boots. It comes to this presently I have no work. Every year it get less. You will see.
15. isn't it ?
16. Yes, people do not want good boots, it seems.
17. It was too expensive. Do you want some boots?
18. I am pretty well, but my elder brother is dead.
19. boot.
20. Do you want any boots ?
21. It's a beautiful piece.
22. Do you want any boots? I can make them quickly. It is a slack time.