

# Arthur Griffith

(1922?)

**M**R. GRIFFITH was born and educated in Ireland. Some years of his early manhood were spent abroad, and he had considerable experience in the actual handling of men on the Rand. I think the native people who served under him must have met in Mr. Griffith a type of master that they had never met before and could never hope to meet again.

Even in these young days his will was already set into something of the granitic quality that later became, not by any means his chief, but one of his most noticeable characteristics.

I remember that some years ago we were talking together, with something of the wonder with which young men who have never been ill in their lives consider sickness, about the illness of a friend. Mr. Griffith said, in a reminiscent way, that once he had very nearly been ill. It was while he was in Africa. There had been an outbreak of fever, and all his responsible assistants and many of his men were down with it. He awakened one morning with a feeling that he did not want to get

out of bed, and while lying in a fuzzy and wuzzy condition he was able to tabulate a number of symptoms which made him practically certain that he also had the fever that was epidemic. But he did not intend to be sick, and he did not intend to have any kind of fever that he had not personally selected or arranged to have. He took himself with some difficulty out of bed, marched to a neighbouring ball-alley, and for some six or seven hours he played a solitary game of hand-ball until even he could play it no longer. It must have been a grimish kind of game and quite devoid of anything in the nature of entertainment. At the end of his "game" he went back to bed and fell asleep. He awoke in the morning without any fever, and, indeed, fever never dared to threaten him again.

This was the young man who returned to Ireland with his mind quite made up that if nobody else could free her, he would do it himself, and the story is illustrative of him in quite a number of ways. The night on which that story was told to me is memorable also because of an incident which throws light on some other aspects of Mr. Griffith's personality: his forbearance, for example; his readiness in action; and, in particular, his more than masterly grip of the subject that happens to be interesting him.

For some time it had been a habit of ours to see each other home up to quite a late hour at night. We were marching down Grafton Street, meaning to turn into Nassau Street, and so to my rooms in Mount Street. Arriving there we would turn about, and I would see Mr. Griffith back to O'Connell Street and the last tram. Mr. Griffith had launched a daily paper called *Sinn Fein*. He had seen it in the cradle, and he was at the moment attending it to the grave. We were discussing

something in connection with the paper. He was a little grave, as befitted the occasion, but by no means unhappy.

“This is the first time in my life,” he said, “that I feel a sort of regret, not a real regret,” he emphasized, “a sort of regret that I have always insisted on being a perfectly honest man.”

“Why should you crave to be a thief on this particular night?” I enquired.

“I could have been a fairly wealthy man if I had the luck in those days to want to be dishonest.”

“So,” I queried, encouragingly.

“In the Africa of those days,” he continued, “men in my position were able to retire after a few years and buy theatres.”

At this moment we had arrived at Nassau Street corner. Some young men, in the negligent manner of those days, were leaning against the doorway of Yeates’ the opticians, and, as we swung around them, one reached out a hand and tapped lightly on my companion’s hat. We looked round. Nothing was visible but three young men who were regarding space with melancholy absorption. We turned to resume our way, and, on the instant, this acrobatic hand tapped again on the hat. We turned once more, and the same trio were still dreaming on the death of kings. Mr. Griffith half turned and returned in the one movement, and on this occasion the guilty hand had not time to be withdrawn. His left fist shot out and caught the owner of the hand a blow that turned him upside down. He was addressing his right fist toward a second man, while I was energetically wrapping myself about the leg of the third, not with a really militant intent, but purely as an obstructive tactic, for this third man was in the act of discharging himself as a running kick at Mr. Griffith, when we all found ourselves sur-

rounded as if by magic by a crowd and a policeman. This officer's experienced eye made a rapid discrimination between the washed and the unwashed.

"Will you give this man in charge, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Griffith was astounded at being invited to deliver any person into the hands of what he politically considered was rank injustice.

"Certainly not," he said, and we turned away.

On the second step he resumed, "Personally I have never wanted to buy a theatre, but our paper would have had at least a chance to make its way and win its public. I am thinking of you men also," he said.

"How do we set up a craving for dishonesty in you?" I marvelled.

There were hasty feet behind us, and, with the words, "Hey, there!" a gruff, sulky voice called on us to halt. It was the young man with the agile hand.

"You knocked me down a minute ago, mister," he said. "Let's see if you can knock me down again."

Mr. Griffith was slightly perplexed, for his interest at the moment was in South Africa, but he was mildly unpacking a disastrous fist out of his trouser pocket, when I intervened and made a short speech. The young man was quite unused to the eloquence of a person who on the previous night had written fifteen poems, and in sheer self-defence he offered to apologize to us both. He wanted to shake hands also, and he did outstretch the identical delinquent paw which had previously toyed with the hat of an innocent and preoccupied stranger. Mr. Griffith for the first time was truly alarmed, and plunged both of his hands precipitately into his pockets, but I shook hands with the young man, for I was very proud of the effect of my

first public speech. We resumed our walk; and, on the second pace:—

“If I had taken the chances that were all around me,” said Mr. Griffith, “I could have paid you writers a great deal more than I am able to pay you now.”

Sadness fell upon my brow like a damp sponge as I realized that, with some bitterness, Fate had visited my friend with a horrible honesty that was destined to bring myself and my family to the workhouse. But my temperament, too, is philosophical, and I seldom complain except in verse. I asked him a question.

“If, by touching a button on that lamp-post, you could kill a person living in China and get all his goods without fear of detection or punishment either here or in hell, would you touch the button?”

Mr. Griffith laughed, but focussed the problem.

“I would not touch the button,” he averred.

“Would O’Connolly?” I urged. “Would Russell? or Montgomery, or Gogarty?”

“Yeats would,” said Mr. Griffith, for at that time he held that there was nothing good about Mr. Yeats except his poetry: but he would perhaps not now maintain these mutually destructive postulates. As I was re-seeing him home that night he told me the story of how he had once nearly been sick.