

HUMOR



LEACOCK

HUMOR

ITS THEORY AND TECHNIQUE

STEPHEN LEACOCK

**DODD, MEAD
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ITS THEORY AND TECHNIQUE

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WINNOWER WISDOM
THE IRON MAN AND THE TIN WOMAN
LAUGH WITH LEACOCK
WET WIT AND DRY HUMOUR
AFTERNOONS IN UTOPIA

HUMOR

ITS THEORY AND TECHNIQUE

WITH
EXAMPLES AND SAMPLES

A Book of Discovery
by
STEPHEN LEACOCK



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CHAPTER I

AN ANALYSIS OF HUMOR

Can We Learn to Be Funny?—Can an Earnest Teacher Help a Student with a Serious Mind to Get Rid of It?—Primitive Merriment with a Club—The Upward Course of Humor—From Nero's Chariot to Barnum's Clown—From Laughter to Tears.

Everybody has often witnessed the spectacle of a man in an armchair bending over toward another man in another armchair and telling him a funny story. We know it is a funny story because of what happens. The face of the man who is listening begins to be visibly affected. There is a tightening of the maxillary muscles together with a relaxation of the muscles of the lips and tongue. The areas at the east and west sides of the eyes become puckered in a peculiar way, and in extreme cases (very, very funny stories) there is a distinct wobbling of the ears. In other words the man is smiling. Presently, as the culmination of the story is reached, the listener goes into a form of convulsion, emitting his breath in hurried gasps as if about to shout. His condition reacts upon the story teller, who now sits back, expands his stomach and goes into a similar convulsion.

If we were not absolutely habituated to this, we should be alarmed and think the men were ill. But we know that they are only laughing. This form of fit or convulsion is called laughter. The men are said to laugh because the story is funny, and the story is known to be funny because the men laugh at it. The man who tells the story is called a story teller. He is said to have a sense of humor. And the man who listens to it has another sense of humor.

This much is common knowledge on the subject. But, strangely enough, beyond this there is nothing but unexplored territory. What laughter is, and why it is, and what is a sense of humor and how you get it, what a joke is, and why it is a joke—all these things remain unknown and unascertained. In a world that studies and teaches everything that can be studied and taught, humor alone remains as an unexplored field.

Few people know anything about humor, or analyze or think about it. It is left clean out of the program of self-improvement. A man will work hard on such things as his game of golf. It is pathetic to see a stout man trying hard to improve his mashie shot, a thing which God forbade to him at birth. But still he tries. Yet would he ever seek to improve his sense of humor, ever practice his funny story, or ever read a

book on how to tell one? He wouldn't, because there are no such books. For all other literary and artistic acquirements there are classes and courses, schools and colleges. People with a talent for music take music lessons. Children with a gift for drawing are taught art. But no one teaches funny boys humor.

For everything else, especially in these hard times, there are teachers waiting at one's elbow, eager to impart it by the dollar's worth. There are correspondence courses in oratory, in deportment, and in painting (both oil and sign). All the older colleges teach literature, economics, sociology and such; and the newer ones have courses in salesmanship, hotel keeping, bee-keeping, investment and embezzlement. There is as yet not a single academic course in humor. There are no degrees in it, and it is not required for entrance into the professions, not even for the law. The whole field is wide open, for colleges have never even thought of it.

The reason is, no doubt, that it has been hitherto taken for granted that humor either is or is not; that the art of amusing speech cannot be imparted; that the humorous outlook cannot be acquired. If this were not so, parents would try to give their children at least a high school standard of fun. Stubborn students from the country would work at their joke books till past midnight, and pedagogical departments award diplomas to fun-makers.

Humor, if thought about at all is looked upon as a "growth." It falls within the scope of the ancient text: "Which of you with taking thought can add to his stature one cubit?" But the thing is a misconception. It might just as wisely read: "Each of you by taking thought can add one cubit to his stature." In these days of building-up exercises and violet ray glass we certainly could.

"The poet," said the Roman writer, "is born not made." But this was only a smart way of saying that he had to be born first and made afterward. So it is with the humorist, and with the art of expressing humor in words. Granted that an innate aptitude is required for real excellence, it is equally true that it may be indefinitely improved by art. As the clergy are wont to say from the pulpit, even a little spark of native merit can be watered in the fire of effort till it grows into a mighty temple. The failure to "teach humor" rests on this misconception, and on the further error of what teaching humor would mean. Teaching humor would not mean teaching people to make fun of things, but teaching people to understand things. Humor, at its highest, is a part of the interpretation of life.

So I can see no reason why humor—as both theory and practice, analysis and performance—should not be taught in college. I could imagine how interesting it would be to plan a set of academic courses. It should run something on this model:

Course I. Elements of Humor. Open to First Year men and Fourth Year

women.

Course II. The Technique of Humor. Four hours a week for four years, leading to the degree of D.F.

Course III. Practical: How to Tell a Funny Story. Men only. This course leads to a government diploma, or license, to tell funny stories in pullman cars.

Course IV. Postgraduate: Tears and Laughter. The highest phase of humor where it passes from the Ridiculous to the Sublime. This course is open only to the older members of the faculty and to First Year women. For in this matter women start where men end.

If this book turns out, as it probably will, to be one of those epoch making volumes which create a revolution in human thought, it will be followed by the establishment of regular college departments in humor, leading to such degrees as those indicated above. There will be correspondence courses with circulars and printed testimonials after the following models:

(1)
GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
TO THE
EUREKA SCHOOL OF FUN

Gentlemen:

I desire to express my appreciation of the effect that your Course No. 6 (Six Weeks Course in Applied Humor) has had upon my mother-in-law. Before taking the course her disposition was of a melancholy if not morose character. Now she keeps us in fits at meal times. Please give her another six weeks.

P.S. What would it cost to send her abroad for a two-year postgraduate course?

(2)
TESTIMONIAL TO THE
LOUDER AND FUNNIER
DIVINITY SCHOOL

Gentlemen:

Pray permit me, as a minister of a large congregation, to express my obligation for your four weeks course in Pulpit Fun. My church is crowded every Sunday evening and I keep them all in a roar. I understand they talk of sending me away for a year for a

postgraduate course. Some propose two years.

(3)

BROKER BREAKS SILENCE: TESTIMONIAL
TO THE BOISTEROUS BUSINESS COLLEGE

Gentlemen:

I want to thank you for the excellent results obtained from your correspondence course on Humor as a Business Stimulant. I am a stockbroker and up till now have been constantly depressed whenever I was cleaned out by a heavy fall of the market. Taking your course has altered everything. The more it falls, the more I laugh. Today there was a twenty point drop in International Hydrogen and I simply sat and roared. This may have been partly because I was selling it. But your course helped me to see the fun of the thing.

Let us turn back and make a beginning with laughter, a thing undoubtedly older than speech. Man could laugh and cry long before he could talk, just as babies can. Indeed it was out of his whines and grunts and chuckles that he made his language. People always connect humor with laughter. In reality it is only an accidental and physical concomitant. Laughter is the mere beginning of humor, both in time and in significance. The end, the final reach, is nearer to tears.

All human origins go back into the mist and vanish into the twilight of our beginning. The sense of fun would reach back as far, to roots as faint, as goes the sense of sight. A potato, in its own infinitely dim way, sees—and no doubt is feebly amused.

More than that, the products of evolution are unequal. Man is by no means the most developed animal in all respects. Compare the sense of smell in a dog, or a deer, with its feeble counterpart in man. So it is with the sense of humor. It is possible that some of the animals are far more developed in that respect than we are. A house fly may have a terrific sense of fun. I have often suspected it when I have seen his merry face and his beaming eyes peeping over the bedclothes in the morning.

No doubt our sense of humor grew up alongside of our emotions and our language. Scholars themselves are in doubt as to just how language began. The chief theories on the subject are known (to those on the inside) as the “splash-spash,” or

“bow-wow” theory, and the “yo-heave-ho” theory, and the theory of spontaneous grunts. That is to say perhaps man got into the way of talking by imitating sounds like the splash of water. Or perhaps language started as a sort of whine or chant, like those of sailors hauling in a rope. The tune, the melody, came first, the style, words, the song, long afterward. Or perhaps he began by the sheer natural physical emptying of his lungs, as when a person sneezes or says “Woof! It’s hot.”

Our laughter originated then, it would seem, long before our speech as a sort of natural physical expression, or outburst, of one’s feeling suddenly good, suddenly victorious. It was a primitive shout of triumph. The savage who cracked his enemy over the head with a tomahawk and shouted “Ha! Ha!” was the first humorist. Here began, so to speak, “the merry ha! ha!,” the oldest and most primitive form of humor. It seems odd to think that even today when we give our acquaintances the “merry ha! ha!” over their minor discomfitures, we are reproducing, true to type, the original form of humor. The Germans would call it *Ur-Humor*. But we don’t need to; we can call it simply the archeocomical or if we like the paleoridiculous.

It seems a far cry to this primitive humor, and yet it is surprising how easily we slip back into it. It has never been quite civilized out of us. Even if we no longer find the triumph of active destruction a “funny” sensation, we can certainly get fun out of the imagination of it. Compare, for example, Bret Harte’s famous account of the breaking up of the scientific society organized at the Stanislow Mining Camp—how, in the middle of a paleontological discussion:

*Then Abner Dean of Angel’s raised a point of order when
A chunk of old red sandstone took him in the abdomen,
And he smiled a kind of sickly smile, and curled up on the floor,
And the subsequent proceedings interested him no more.*

One admits that there is here the added element of the contrast between the gravity of science and the levity of conduct on the Stanislow. But the destruction of Abner Dean counts for much.

Perhaps the best example of this kind of thing is found in the work of that illustrious artist, Captain Harry Graham, who has adorned alike the court and the camp, the stalls and the bookstalls. Captain Graham in his *Ruthless Rhymes for Heartless Homes* has boldly accepted the destructive principle of primitive humor at its face value without mitigation or apology. His readers in their “heartless homes” are supposed to go into bursts of merriment over such an item as the accidental drowning of grandmamma, the loss of a stranger by the odd chance of a hole in the

ice, or by the amusing malice of young Augustus.

It is difficult to reproduce the *Ruthless Rhymes* without the delightful illustrations which accompany them. But one may in imagination reconstruct the exploits of young Augustus in a picture which depicts a huge London bus, brought to a standstill by some apparent mishap, a little crowd collected, and a malicious boy obviously chuckling over what has happened:

*My son Augustus in the street one day
Was feeling quite particularly merry,
When someone asked him,—Wot's the quickest way
To get me out to Highgate Cemetery?
The quickest way? replies my little Gus,
And pushed the feller underneath a bus!
I will say this about my little son,
'E does enjoy a bit of fun!*

Children easily reach back to this primitive humor, just as all their embryonic life processes repeat the history of the race. "Jack the Giant-Killer" is full of it. "Puss in Boots" contains a roaring piece of fun when the cat swallows the ogre.

But for humanity at large, apart from people of exception such as Harry Graham and Jack the Giant-Killer, once the primitive age was over, humor had to be softened from actual destruction and physical injury to the mere appearance of it. It was no longer funny to break a man's leg and watch him hop round on the stump of it; but it *was* funny to see a man, with the temporary numbness called pins and needles, stumble about unable to stand up. It became no longer amusing to watch a man drown—though Lucretius many centuries ago thought it entertaining—but it remained funny to watch him take a tumble on skates, as Mr. Winkle does in the *Pickwick Papers*. The Romans liked to see a chariot and its occupant smashed in the circus; we prefer to see a clown fall off a trapeze. Our clown, poor creature, is the living symbol of our redeemed humanity, uplifted from cruelty to make-believe. Humor thus grew to turn on a contrast between the thing as it is, or ought to be, and the thing smashed out of shape and as it ought not to be. We can appreciate this by remembering that a broken umbrella looks "funny." This broadened into a general notion of contrast, of incongruity, of a disharmony between a thing and its setting, between its present and its usual accompaniment, like a naked savage in a silk hat.

It was somewhere at the point indicated that mere vindictiveness parted company with humor, and became its hideous counterpart, mockery. The Red Indian exulting and jibing over his tortured victim, this is mockery; the scoffers that stood

and “mocked” around the Cross; the taunts of the hanging judges; the sneer of the infidel; the brutality of the critic—all these are mockery, a thing debased and degraded from what it might have been. Too much of the humor of all ages, and far too much of our own, partakes of it.

The original humor was expressed by actions, not by words. It was, and is, represented by progressive gradations as victory, cruelty, teasing, horseshplay, hazing, practical jokes and April Fool. But as early as art and letters themselves, humor found its expression in drawing and in words. Even a savage could draw a man with a long nose. Indeed his main difficulty was to draw him with a short one. Hence the art of caricature could not get far till the art of correct drawing had got further. So, too, with words; when language got properly formulated it became possible not only to use words to call up a funny, or ridiculous, idea, but to get fun out of the words themselves. A contrast or incongruity could be got out of the difference between the apparent and the real significance of the sounds and characters. Here entered the mode of humor called Wit, the presentation of the humorous in a way involving an unexpected play on words, or, as it were, taking fun out of the words themselves. When Pope Gregory said of the captive English children, “*Not Angles but angels*” (Gregory’s mixture, so to speak), the joke made such a hit that it lasted over a thousand years. The silly anagrams and acrostics of the medieval monks were an early instance of this verbalism.

Humor, then, as an element in art and letters, has come down to us from the centuries. But it was only in quite modern times, preëminently in the nineteenth century, that it received its highest development. Let scholars dispute if they like as to whether Greek drama is higher than the drama of today, whether Homer is a greater poet than Omar, and how Aristotle measures up beside the average college president of today. But about humor there is no doubt. The classical humor is poor stuff: the medieval scholars’ humor is simply silly: the medieval peoples’ humor is primitive. Only with the modern world, and only in proportion as it loses its primitive credulity and the intense earnestness of its beliefs and superstitions, does humor enter largely into literature. Humor in a world of waning beliefs remains like Hope still left at the bottom of Pandora’s box when all the evils of the gods flew out from it upon the world.

No “scholar” would admit the truth of this. Scholars tell us that Aristophanes was probably the wittiest man that ever lived—so witty that it takes half a page of notes to explain one of his jokes. Scholars also claim that the humor of Shakespeare is deeper than any other—so deep that you often see no bottom to it. And then there were also Dante and Milton and John Bunyan and a lot of other fun-makers who

keep their readers in a roar.

Leave Shakespeare out of count. It is dangerous to speak of him; and he was without doubt, as the creator of Falstaff, a great humorist. Make an honorable exception of Molière, a humorist head and shoulders above his time, a timeless man like Isaac Newton or Galileo. Apart from a few exceptions, to most of us the so-called humor of the earlier modern world is pretty dreary. Cervantes had a fine idea, in the mass, but for us what prolixity!

The eighteenth century with its Addison, its Sterne, its Goldsmith, shows the rising sun. But it was the nineteenth century that brought the full effulgence of the day. The Victorian age represents an epoch in the history of letters greater than any that preceded it—greater, in pure letters, it may well be, than any about to follow it. True as this is in general, it is nowhere more true than in the domain of humor. Charles Dickens and Mark Twain and Alphonse Daudet, surrounded by a galaxy of lesser stars, represent a reach far beyond anything preceding.

In the mere matter of verbal form the nineteenth century, with its diffused printing and its widening education, was able to run riot. The pun came into its own and more than its own. For a generation or two it was *par excellence* the English form of wit. Tom Hood, with a marvelous facility for words, helped to drive the pun to death at the hands of an exhausted public. What the pun was to England, bad spelling was to America. Here the humor exaltation was a sort of vindictive triumph over the spelling book, the revered guide and the dreaded authority of the little red schoolhouse. A whole generation of Artemus Wards traded on bad spelling. In the end they killed bad spelling in America as dead as the dead pun in England.

But these and other verbal forms are but a matter of the technique, the mode, of humor, not the informing spirit which is its essence. Beyond the verbal effects of jangling syllables and misused words is the higher stage of the humor of character, turning on the contrasts of incongruities that make up “queer” people.

Beyond this again is humor in its highest meaning and its furthest reach which does not depend on verbal incongruities, or on tricks of sight and hearing. It finds its basis in the incongruity of life itself, the contrast between the fretting cares and the petty sorrows of the day and the long mystery of the tomorrow. Here laughter and tears become one, and humor becomes the contemplation and interpretation of our life. In this aspect the thought of the nineteenth century far excelled all that had preceded it. The very wistfulness of its new ignorance—contrasted with the brazen certainty of bygone dogma—lends it something pathetic.

But in the presentation of the theory and technique of humor to be offered in this book, a beginning will be made with the merely verbal and superficial aspects. Later

chapters will discuss the humor of character, the history of humor, and its highest culmination in the sublime.

CHAPTER II

FUN WITH WORDS

That Very Silly Thing, Indeed, the Pun—Bad Spelling and Artemus Ward—
Meiosis and Hyperbole—The Technique of Verbal Forms—Mr. Ballou and Mrs.
Gamp—The Amazing Genius of O. Henry.

*My little dears who learn to read, pray early learn to shun
That very silly thing indeed which people call a pun.
For instance, ale will make you ail, your aunt an ant may kill,
You in a vale may buy a veil, and Bill may pay the bill;
Or if to France your barque you steer, at Dover, it may be,
A peer appears upon the pier, who, blind, still goes to sea.*
Ontario School Reader. 1876.

In the above stanza, the poet (the verse looks like that of Theodore E. Hook), having called the pun a “very silly thing indeed,” proceeds to prove it to our satisfaction in the lines that follow. Yet, as I remember it, they were intended at that remote period to be very amusing, an oasis of laughter in a desert of information.

Punsters are becoming rare. Many people have probably never seen one. There is as yet no law against them but only a sort of social ostracism that meets their effort with groans. The use of the groan as a form of applause belongs wholly to the younger generation. It is as effective as it is cruel. And if anything is needed to give the pun its final quietus, the schoolboy groan can do it.

Yet in point of historic dignity the pun stands easily first among the verbal devices of nineteenth century humor. It was among schoolboys and on the border line between the nursery and the schoolroom that it flourished best. But even adults of the earlier generation leaned heavily on it for support, and at least one name—that of Tom Hood—is inscribed in the history of literature on the strength of it.

In the case of the pun, the contrast or incongruity that makes humor is got from the fact that one and the same sound means two different things, and hence the word brings into connection two things that really have nothing to do with one another. In its most elemental sense there is nothing more in it than the indignity done to the words themselves—beyond that there is no thought and no meaning.

The pun naturally flourished best, and still to some extent flourishes, in the nursery and the schoolroom. The ability to use words is a new thing to the child; the

ability to misuse them, consciously, is an awakening joy. It is a sort of triumph over the words themselves.

Such are the puns of schoolboys—this ancient one, for instance, on the divisions of the map of Ireland:

“Will you lend me your Ulster?”

“I Connaught, I will never be a Leinster.”

“What a Munsterous pun!”

The “triumph,” the primitive exultation out of which humor begins, is simply over the words—knocking them down, degrading them with a “merry ha-ha!”

But outside of the nursery and the classroom, puns get infinitely tiresome. At times, of course, the sheer ingenuity of getting the sounds together excites a sort of intellectual admiration. The thing is not exactly funny, but it is as “smart” as a clever conundrum.

Thus on a famous occasion in the French Chamber of Deputies the announcement was made that the city Herat in Afghanistan had been taken and the question was asked, “What does the Shah of Persia say to it?” This isn’t funny in English and there is no funny thought to it. But there was a burst of merriment, and the member speaking said he was afraid he had “aroused the smiles of the assembly”; and then they roared again. Why? Because in French the words were:

“Messieurs, on a pris l’Hérat, (les rats)

Que dit le Shah? (le chat)

.

Je crains d’avoir éveillé les souris de la Chambre.”

.

This is the class of pun characteristic of the work of the greatest of all punsters Tom Hood. It is the ingenious incongruity in the words—nothing in the thought—that generally is the basis of his pun. Thus:

Ben Battle was a soldier bold

And used to war’s alarms

But a cannon-ball *took off his legs*

So he *laid down his arms!*

The only point here is the oddity of our English language which allows a man to lay down his arms without taking them off—because arms mean two things.

Translate it and it's all gone:

*Ayant perdu les jambes par un
Coup de canon, il quitta le service.*

Not so funny, is it, or rather funny in a new incongruity that the French words won't mean what the English did.

But the pun is at once lifted into a higher range when the confusion of the sound accidentally as it were brings out a secondary effect. This is often seen in the blunders and "howlers" made by schoolboys and students in their examination papers. Here is the oft-quoted case of a schoolboy who defined the equator as a "menagerie lion" running round the earth. He meant an "imaginary line" or rather those were the words taught him. Hence the reflection on the hopelessly mechanical way in which he had been taught. The pun in this case is not a mere verballity; it carries an underlying meaning. Still better perhaps is a piece of misspelling (involuntary pun) of a pupil of mine, years ago, who wrote that "Europe in the middle ages was governed on the fiddle system." It certainly was.

It will nearly always be found that where a distinguished person has left behind him a reputation as a punster, the puns have survived because of this secondary or further application. This is the case with that lovable man the Reverend Sydney Smith (1771-1845) sometime Canon of St. Paul's Cathedral. It is related that on one occasion his fellow canons were discussing, with characteristic clerical prolixity, the question of putting a wooden sidewalk round the cathedral. "Come, gentlemen" interrupted Sydney Smith, "lay your heads together and the thing is done." Anyone hearing the story reflects with a chuckle, "Yes, it would be!" An analyst would see that the humor is based on the juxtaposition of the solidity and dignity of the heads of the clergymen and their use as a sidewalk.

Sometimes the wit and merit of a pun depend on its being impromptu and actual, not merely related. Anyone could have thought it out, worked it out. In that case it isn't amusing. But when it is obviously made on the spot, the element of the impromptu gives it a sort of intellectual merit. I remember once, years ago, in the old unredeemed days of the saloon with the long mahogany bar and the long glass mirror, seeing a bibulous gentleman, irritated at the quality of the "free lunch," pick up a too-solid sandwich and throw it at the looking glass. A witty friend of mine standing by murmured, "There's food for reflection."

On another occasion at a supper party where I was present, also in the dim past,

when the game of golf was just beginning its vogue in Canada, somebody spoke of the new clubhouse and of the “pro” just engaged. “It seems,” said someone else “that he’s a very deserving young man; he’s using the money he gets at golf to pay his fees at the university.” “Indeed,” said a witty guest, with a simulation of bright interest, “*putting himself through college!*”

This same witty friend of mine—it was away back in the year 1900, when Lord Roberts was pursuing General Cronje—once amused himself at a social gathering by announcing, with all the appearance of keen interest, a fresh item of news from the South African War.

“Did you see,” he said, “that Lord Roberts has sent out his p.p.c. cards!”

“His p.p.c. cards?” said the puzzled listener. “What for? Is he to leave South Africa?”

“Oh no—*pour prendre Cronje.*”

But such effects depend for their value on their actuality. Anybody with a book of rhymes and synonyms could make them up.

The part played in the development of English humor by the pun is represented in America by the part played by bad spelling. For at least a whole generation bad spelling—that is to say, incorrect spelling not sanctioned by the spelling book—was the most obvious and popular mode of comic wit.

It is interesting to see how this came about and how it fits into the theory of humor. In earlier days—in Elizabethan and Stuart times—there was nothing funny about bad spelling—or not to the people who used it, though it may look funny to us now.

Here is an example of seventeenth century spelling from the pen of a highly cultivated gentlewoman, Mrs. Ralph Verney, writing to her exiled husband somewhere about the year 1650.

I must give thee some account of our own babyes heare. For Jack his leggs are most miserable crooked as ever I saw any child's and yett thank god he goes very strongly and is very strayte in his body as any child can bee: and is a very fine child all but his legges. . . .

Mrs. Verney apparently forgot, or didn't care, that she had called them his “leggs” a line or two above. A little later in the letter she goes back to “leggs,” and remarks that Jack would “very fayne goe into ffrance to his father.”

Neither Artemus Ward nor Josh Billings ever thought of such a triumph over orthography as “ffrance,” without any capital letter and with a double f.

But in the seventeenth century the idea of a single unvarying standard of spelling was only just getting well established. In an earlier age to spell well seemed to mean to find some striking, expressive and phonetic way of putting letters together to make words. Hence the variations of Shakespeare’s name and the vagaries of Elizabethan writing. Strangely enough the same idea of spelling is coming back again in the modern commercial world. “Koffy Shoppes” and “Fittite” clothes and “Kool” drinks are a reversion to the past.

But in the middle nineteenth century, especially in America, it was not so. The glory of the nation was that it could read and write. It carried its tattered spelling books to its frontier cabins. In the little red schoolhouse the “scholars” spelled out their syllables in chorus. And in the evening gatherings in the log houses and frame schools, “spelling bees,” were at once an education and a diversion. “Abe” Lincoln could “spell down” any other adult in the settlement.

Hence the very eminence of spelling rendered it all the better mark for artful degradation. Bad spelling had in it something of the fun of irreverence without the evil conscience. And of all the bad spellers who ever adorned the history of American humor Artemus Ward (Charles Ferrar Browne, 1834-1867) came easily first. This quaint pathetic person, for a brief hour the delight of London, was a sort of wandering minstrel, born centuries after his time. He wandered from a New England farm to a printer’s office in Cleveland, and from there to the new Eldorado of Nevada and California. He published strange little “pieces,” gathered into what he entitled *Artemus Ward: His Book* (1862). He wandered over to England, gave what he called “lectures” to uproarious audiences of the “quality” of London—whose laughter elicited from him pained expressions of disapproval. He was, indeed, a perfect artist in make-believe—a humorist not of words but of manner, gesture and assumed personality. On his English lecture tour (his health was frail) he faded and died (1867). But around his memory a loving world has entwined a garland of affection as for a lost child.

Most typical of Artemus’ life and his work, and his place in the development of the humor of America is the famous historical occasion when Abraham Lincoln read aloud to his assembled Cabinet Artemus Ward’s “latest.”

It was on the morning of Monday, September 22, 1862, that Abraham Lincoln called his Cabinet together at the White House. He wished to announce to them what was undoubtedly the most momentous decision of his life. He was to read to them the Proclamation, which he had written the day before, setting free the slaves in

the rebel States and destined to end American slavery for ever.

But first Lincoln informed the Cabinet that Artemus Ward had sent him his new book and that he would like to read them a chapter of it; with which, he read to them the "High-Handed Outrage at Utica."

The dignified Mr. Salmon P. Chase, Secretary of the Treasury, listened with dry disapproval. "The President," he tells us in his diary, "seemed to enjoy it very much." The Cabinet apparently laughed at it, except Stanton, who wouldn't.

Then Lincoln laid the little book aside, and told the Cabinet that he had made a "promise to his Maker" which he proposed now to fulfil. With that he read aloud his proclamation for the emancipation of the slaves.

And here is what Artemus Ward wrote, and what Lincoln himself, in the cast of his mind, a humorist of the highest order, evidently found very funny:

HIGH-HANDED OUTRAGE AT UTICA

In the Faul of 1856, I showed my show in Utiky, a trooly grate sitty in the State of New York.

The people gave me a cordyal recepshun. The press was loud in her prases.

I day as I was given a descripshun of my Beests and Snaiks in my usual flowry stile what was my skorn & disgust to see a big burly feller walk up to the cage containin my wax figgers of the Lord's Last Supper, and cease Judas Iscarrot by the feet and drag him out on the ground. He then commenced fur to pound him as hard as he cood.

"What under the son are you abowt?" cried I.

Sez he, "What did you bring this pussylanermus cuss here fur?" & hit the wax figger another tremenjis blow on the hed.

Sez I, "You egrejus ass, that air a wax figger—a representashun of the false 'Postle."

Sez he, "That's all very well fur you to say but I tell you, old man, that Judas Iscarrot can't show hissself in Utiky with impunerty by a darn site!" with which observashun he kaved in Judassis hed. The young man belonged to 1 of the first famerlies in Utiky. I sood him, and the Joory brawt in a verdick of Arson in the 3d degree.

The historic interest of the episode and of the extract is immense. But it seems strange that anybody could have found it very funny. Yet Artemus himself thought the

“nub” of the piece (“Judas Iscariot can’t show himself in Utiky with impunity by a darn site”), so funny that he had already used and readapted it three or four times. As to the President, it has become part of the Lincoln myth that he fell back upon these follies—the jokes and funny stories—only to relieve the breaking strain that threatened to crush him. This is nonsense. Strain or no strain, happy or unhappy, Lincoln loved what he thought a funny story. His cares and his surroundings had nothing to do with it. If he had been invited over to stay with Queen Victoria, he’d have told her a few “good ones.”

Bad spelling, as part of the technique of humor, ran riot in Artemus Ward’s day. But it died out and passed unregretted. To us even in retrospect it is never funny except in the few cases where it pleases and surprises by its ingenuity. It is funny when Artemus, in referring to a boa constrictor snake, calls it a “boy constructor.” It is funny when Josh Billings writes the word “yph” and we realize that he is trying to spell “wife.” But on the whole bad spelling exercises upon us now not a humorous effect but the contrary—which makes the written humor of the poor, lost Artemus little more than a historical product.

It is a considerable advance from the pun and bad spelling to the technique afforded by Meiosis and Hyperbole. These are very recondite terms. I remember many years ago being delighted to read the remark of a London book reviewer: “Mr. Leacock’s humor is based on an ingenious mixture of meiosis and hyperbole.” I felt that, after that, all I needed was a can of meiosis and a can of hyperbole and to go down to the cellar and mix them up.

Hyperbole, as most people know, means overstatement, exaggeration. Meiosis, as nobody knows, means understatement. Hyperbole has had a lot to do with the general development of our language. In order to “put a thing across” we state it strongly, we overstate it, often to a degree not literally possible. This is called a figure of speech. Thus we talk of people being “bathed in a flood of tears,” or being “on fire with enthusiasm.” They aren’t. Presently the very familiarity of the words weakens them. To say that a man is “incensed” or “melted” sounds quite literal and ordinary. We have to find a new exaggeration. Thus moves language. Half our words were once lies, used for effect.

But in a quite different way exaggeration was used, from the earliest times, as a mode of narrative and presently of conscious humor. All primitive literature is full of it. See the legends of the Round Table and the Sagas. In the nineteenth century this mode was worn out as narrative, except in the nursery, but came into its own as humor. It was one of the type forms of what came to be called “American Humor,” though never its main reliance. Mark Twain developed it to a high degree. In his

Innocents Abroad, in describing his visits to the Italian picture galleries, he says:

We have seen thirteen thousand St. Jeromes, and twenty-two thousand St. Marks, and sixteen thousand St. Matthews, and sixty thousand St. Sebastians, and four millions of assorted monks, undesignated, and we feel encouraged to believe that when we have seen more of these various pictures, and had a larger experience, we shall begin to take an absorbing interest in them like our cultivated countrymen from *Amérique*.

But exaggeration taken by itself is poor stuff as humor. It needs to be combined with some other subtle elements, as a chemist makes a compound with a crude base and a minute portion of a powerful drug. Compare Bill Nye:

“There must be at least 500,000,000 rats in the United States; of course I am speaking only from memory.”

It is not the number of rats that is exaggerated; it is the power of consecutive human observation. The effect is brought out by the incongruity between the familiar form of words “speaking only from memory,” and the queer purpose to which it is put—counting all the American rats.

Sometimes the exaggeration goes beyond the bounds of what is possible in the physical world, yet retains a ludicrous analogy with common sense. As an illustration—a brave man ought not to fear lightning and should be willing to face it rather than let it subdue his native courage. But what are we to say to Eli Perkins’s statement:

“I got so sick of the lightning everlastingly fooling round my farm in Maine that one day I went out to the barnyard and took six strokes of it on my bare back.”

The opposite form to exaggeration is meiosis, or understatement, and this probably flourishes more among English writers and English people generally than anywhere else in the world. It is a part of English character. English people abhor sentimentality (the overdone expression of feeling), prefer to keep their sorrows silent rather than to parade them, and admire reserve and reticence. They like to make the least of things rather than to make the most of them.

Thus an Englishman speaks of the paintings of the great masters as “not half bad.” He classes Beethoven’s music as “rather good” and describes Niagara Falls as

“quite striking.” If he is ruined financially he says he has had “rather a nasty knock.” If he has lost one arm and one leg in the war, he “came out a bit shy.” If he falls out of an airplane he says that things looked “rather ticklish for a while.” If he is dead broke, he says, he is “up a tree.” If he is half starved he says he’s “in a hole.” It will be recalled how the war news from the North Sea used to call it “certain signs of activity” when two or three war ships clashed together; and when the Germans bombarded the Yorkshire coast, spoke of it as “liveliness.”

A Frenchman, as far at least as his language goes, lives in a world of tragedies, passion and disasters. All of his words are overstatements. He is “crushed,” “overwhelmed,” “annihilated,” “transported.” All sorts of things happen to him all the time.

The American hits a happy mean between the English and the French, and whenever anything happens to him he lies about it. If he loses his money he says he has made a “clean up” and is getting out. If his wife leaves him he says she is in the Adirondacks. After all, it’s simpler and nicer for one’s friends. All three, English, American and French are just as good men. It is only the method of expression that differs.

So it comes about that the English easily slip into meiosis as a congenial form of humor. What they do unconsciously as their way of talking they do consciously as their way of joking. This is done not only in literary writing but in casual narrative. Thus an Englishman would tell about having a row with a cabman in words such as these:

“So the gentleman seemed to be getting *rather excited* (the cabman isn’t a gentleman and he is more than rather excited) and dancing around in *most extraordinary manner* and even *suggesting the possibility* of bashing one’s face so that one was just wondering about *a little bit of persuasion over the head* with a golf club, when luckily a bobby . . . etc., etc.”

English story tellers of a humorous sort, such as Mr. P. G. Wodehouse (a prince among them), run easily to a sort of sustained understatement. Mr. Kipling, who could have been a great humorist if he had had time to (it is a leisurely trade), rolls off whole pages of meiosis. In his case it is better still; it is “smothered meiosis,” depending less on the single word than on a general effect. In Kipling’s hands (apart from a few pieces of exception) the whole of India is meiositated (or meiosificated), with the horror, the tragedy, and the stink taken out of it. Consider in such a

connection the battle scenes in “The Drums of the Fore and Aft.” The whole story has a sort of undercurrent of something like humor running underneath. Giant Afghans are pleasant fellows, and Goorkhas with *Kukri* knives cheery little chaps always on the grin. . . . Thus ever mankind, through the mouths of those who speak for it, seeks to explain away its evils.

More than one beautiful example of meiosis is found in that superb piece of humor *My Lady Nicotine*, the appearance of which in 1888 indicated in James Barrie a new star on the horizon. One recalls the exquisite narrative of the killing of the editor. Here is what purports to be a part of the evidence given at the inquest held on the editor’s body:

Witness deposed:

I heard voices in altercation in a room near me. I thought that was likely to be the editor’s. I opened the door and went in. He had the editor on the floor and was jumping on him. I said, “Is that the editor?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Have you killed him?” He said, “Yes,” again. I said, “Oh!” and went away. That is all I remember of the affair.

Cross-examined: It did not occur to me to interfere. I thought very little of the affair at the time. I think I mentioned it to my wife in the evening. But I will not swear to that.

Indeed the whole book *My Lady Nicotine* is a sustained piece of meiosis—the understatement of life, the understatement of effort, the minimization of energy. Here is Scrymgeour who can’t bother to make the effort to correct a friend who asks after his “brother Henry” (he didn’t have any) and thus brings into mythical existence a brother who haunts his life. Here is Moggridge, who forgets to water the chrysanthemum. As technique the book is beautiful. Barrie moved on afterward to the larger humor and pathos of character and fate—the web of life. But this lighter web of gossamer should not be lost from sight.

Puns and bad spelling, overstatement and understatement are really only a few of the most obvious forms of humor in the misuse of words. The whole subject is so new and so unstudied that there is no terminology to apply to it. Thus there ought to be a word to mean “humor in the misuse of words.” But there isn’t. Still less have the various included cases any names or classification. So they must be picked up haphazard, anyhow, with such names as can in some way indicate them.

Face Value Technique. In a lot of humor effects, the technique consists in the contrast between the face value of the words or phrases as usually used and the logical significance of it. For example, we have a way of using a rhetorical question to replace a statement. We say, “Our school days, what memories do they not recall?” “My old nurse, can I ever forget her?”

Now many people—and especially Mr. Bob Benchley—see the weak spot in this construction; take the question at its face value and answer it, and what do you get?

“India”—it is Mr. Benchley writing a brief novel of Indian life—“what mysteries does the name not suggest?” Then Mr. Benchley pauses (presumably) and adds: “Well, I can think of a few that it doesn’t anyway—such as the mystery of the disappearance of the lost Charley Ross and why New York didn’t win the World Series. . . .”

No one after getting on to these forms could ever again say, “My old nurse, can I ever forget her?” He would fear someone might say, “Yes, I think so, if you get a young one.”

Exactly the converse to the Face Value Form is found when words and phrases are rushed forward into a significance which they won’t bear on closer inspection; in fact the significance involves a complete impossibility. Yet the sense emerges with a queer incongruity between the fact that it does make sense and the equally true fact that it ought not to.

The author of the present work (if I may with modesty call myself that) has probably made more extended use of this than any other person who has written as copiously.

Thus, a rejected lover, in a wild frenzy of emotion, “leaped upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions.” The essence of this mode is that the words seem to be pushed forward into a meaning they don’t want. It is as if one tumbled them down hill. Example:

The legendary Bulbeks were a fabulous race, half man, half horse, half bird.

We have thus given them three halves which is more than arithmetic allows. Yet the sense is clear, and so we have as it were “taken a rise” out of the word half.

Another technique of humor somewhat analogous to Face Value is when words and phrases are, so to speak, *made to work overtime*. That is, they are forced into a meaning never given to them, but which on examination seems perfectly logical, as

a meaning they ought to bear. The sudden verbal novelty brings a pleasant shock of surprise.

An example. A little boy said, "The food at the picnic was lovely. I'd have eaten more of it but I *ran out of stomach*."

Exactly. He'd heard of people "running out of money" and "running out of bread," etc., and he diagnosed his case as "running out of stomach."

Much of the oft-quoted child humor (so pleasing in our own children, so tiresome in our friends') is of this sort. It has in it, apart from its form, a pretty element of the pleasure that we take from our child *being right about it*, as the words really *ought* to mean what he makes them mean.

Mark Twain had an extraordinary facility for this extended use, this "overtime" use of words and phrases. It was one of the special features of his technique. It was based upon the same innocence of the artistic eye as enabled him to see the old Italian masters in their true colors (or lack of them).

Thus when in his *Yankee* he speaks of a knight's armor as "hardware" he was right. So it would be in a Connecticut hardware store. Similarly he speaks of a little town in the Western States where the people were very religious and where every protestant sect had a *plant* of its own. Why not? If the apparatus of men and goods that makes up a factory is called a *plant*, then why not the apparatus that makes religion a going concern?

Mark Twain also employed a somewhat similar verbal trick of technique by making his characters use and confuse words that seem to be alike and seem to mean something but don't. At times the effects are quite dazzling. See in *Roughing It* where "old Mr. Ballou" says that the horses are "bituminous from long deprivation."

Mark Twain of course had no monopoly on this misuse of words put into the mouth of a funny character. On the contrary it became one of the most universal modes of fun in the nineteenth century. The only trouble was the difficulty in doing it well. From the pens of lesser people it became as tiresome as a bad pun. But at its best it is delightful. Charles Dickens could do it beautifully when he wanted to. Dickens, of course, could have been a burlesque writer if he had not been fortunately saved from it by his emotionalism, his eager conceit and his desire to save the world. See how easily he drops into pure burlesque in the opening chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*. And in the same book, in the language of the immortal Mrs. Gamp, we see the technique of confused words effected to perfection. (*Readers of the newer age see under Gamp, Sairey, or Sarah, character by Dickens, Charles (1812-1870) in his book Chuzzlewit, Martin.*) Mrs. Gamp speaks of the

steamer that ran from London to Antwerp as the “Ankworks package.” Why not? If a steamer can come to be a packet, why can’t it be a “package”? And if foreigners insist on such outlandish names as “Antwerp” surely “Ankworks” is close enough, and sounds more British and straightforward.

But if one wants to see a perfect glory and riot of verbal forms one must turn to the American O. Henry. Here it is as a garden exuberant with mingled weeds and blossom. No one ever used language as O. Henry did. The careless way in which he threw it round has never been equaled or approached.

We are told that the “reading public” is losing touch—have lost touch—with O. Henry. But the thinking public has not—and will not. O. Henry’s name and his works belong to the history of letters, and not in America alone. The circumstances of our time—the easy print, the flowing syndicated page—render the “reading public” and the pabulum on which it feeds a transitory and changing thing, like water in a pipe or colors in a chameleon. But as the “public” passes and dies, literature, the real literature, remains, like the golden sands left in the bed of the stream.

To this literature belongs the name and the memory of O. Henry. Yet the circumstances of his life—his lack of school, his roving life in the West, the fugitive years in Latin America and then the dark shadow of the prison, his emergence into the twilight, his broken life and its decline—all of this gave to his work a peculiar and fragmentary character. It is as if it were only an indication of what he might have done, as if it showed that henceforth nothing for him was worth while. Nor was it. Readers of Bob Davis’s fascinating book, *The Caliph of Bagdad—O. Henry*, can appreciate the background and the spirit of O. Henry’s work.

None of it is complete. None of it is the work of absorption. Much of it is as the careless sport of genius, the mind elsewhere. Other natures, perhaps, blighted thus by earth’s cruelty, might have retired, silent, into the dark, written perhaps a priceless sonnet or two, and so died. Not so O. Henry. He wrote—because he needed money—and because he couldn’t help writing. But he wrote, often with a queer contempt of writing itself; his was the exact opposite to the self-conscious artist, choosing his words, luxuriating in his own conceit, trimming and clipping his prose like a Dutch gardener on a lawn.

O. Henry’s mind was incapable, or had by fate been rendered incapable, of a long and sustained flight. His wings broke easily under him. Life was not worth the effort of the altitude. Hence the form of his writing runs to short stories; “anecdotes” they have been falsely called; but we can fuse them together into a vast single picture of his Enchanted Bagdad or his Illimitable West. And hence too in point of technique O. Henry developed an extraordinary aptitude for misused verbal forms—quick and

lazy. It was as if he shifted certain gears and gadgets in his head and the words automatically came out a little off-center. Just as the pun becomes to the inveterate punster, almost automatic, a matter of auricular nerve and sound reproduction—a self-starter, so to speak—so O. Henry’s quaint verbal forms flow effortless from his pen.

Especially does he love to put them into the mouths of his Western characters, his Jeff Peters, his Andy Tucker and Telemachus Hicks. The collection of stories called *Heart of the West* is a perfect garden of such flowers. Here are a few odd blossoms:

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“She was a woman” [says Telemachus Hicks in describing his rivalry with Paisley Fish for the affections of the widow Jessup], “that would have tempted an anchovy to forget his vows.”

.

“It’s right plausible of you, Mr. Pratt” [says Mrs. Sampson, another Western widow with rival lovers], “to take up the curmudgeons on your friends’ behalf, but it don’t alter the fact that he has made proposals to me sufficiently obnoxious to ruffle the ignominy of any lady.”

.

“She sang some” [relates Jud Odour in speaking of Miss Willella of Pimenta], “and exasperated the piano with quotations from the operas.”

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“I tell you, Andy” [says old Mack Lonsbury in disclaiming all knowledge of women], “I never had the least intersection with their predispositions.”

CHAPTER III

PARODY, BURLESQUE AND MISTRANSLATION

The Parasite and the Parody—Mr. Birdikin and the Victorian Age—The Sherlock Holmes Saga—Translation and Mistranslation—The Jumping Frog in a French Jump—The Portuguese Grammar and the Studious Youth.

Biology has nothing against a parasite. He is as good as anybody else. Indeed the biologist calls the animal on which a parasite feeds, its "host." This seems a genial and kindly relationship. In the plant world the connection appears even better. When the mistletoe clings to the sturdy oak and the Canadian wild grape vine throws its waving tendrils about the cedar and buries it under its foliage, the suggestion is of an embrace, of love and mutual dependence.

So it comes that a whole class of humorous literature may be called "parasitic" without involving offense. No one should mind being compared to a Virginia creeper, though he might object to comparison with other kinds. Lewis Carroll and W. S. Gilbert were parasites. So was Artemus Ward and so is Bob Benchley—not to come nearer home. But just as the parasite may bring to the parent plant elements of life and sustenance and purify it from disease, so the parasitic forms of literature may serve to invigorate and purify the whole body of letters. A large proportion of the pages of *Punch* are parasitic, and *Punch* is the most wholesome thing in England.

Now this parasitic literature includes the whole range of humorous writing—achieved or attempted—which consists in getting fun out of something already written.

First of all are the plain straight verbal parodies such as schoolboys write. They are mostly parodies of poetry, because verse is easier to get at than prose, higher in its utmost reach, but lower at the base. Anybody can write verse, with a dictionary and an axe; and so anybody can, in a kind of way, write a verse parody.

Such are the innumerable parodies of *Hiawatha*, of the "Charge of the Light Brigade" or Macaulay's *Lays of Ancient Rome* and of "The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck." These parodies have no intention of satirizing or criticizing the parent form. They merely take it as the pattern or model on which they frame their theme. Such humor as there is, if there is any, depends on the juxtaposition thus made, by similarity of form, between the lofty theme of the poem and the commonplace or trivial theme of the parody. It is a case of the humor of destruction or degradation.

Macaulay writes:

Lars Porsena of Clusium
By the Nine gods he swore
That the great house of Tarquin
Should suffer wrong no more,
(etc.)

His parasite echoes back:

John Jones of Jesus, Cambridge,
By the Nine gods he swore
That though he had been ploughed nine times
He would be ploughed no more.
(etc., etc.)

Lord Tennyson wrote in his famous outburst of Victorian sentimentality, "Locksley Hall," as its opening stanza:

Comrades leave me here a little while as yet 'tis early morn;
Leave me here and, when you want me, sound upon the bugle horn
(etc., etc.)

Mr. Theodore Martin, soon after the poem appeared, improved upon it thus:

Comrades you may pass the rosy. With permission of the chair,
I shall leave you for a little, for I'd like to take the air.
Whether 'twas the sauce at dinner or that glass of ginger beer,
Or these strong cheroots, I know not, but I feel a little queer.

Since then, the sentiment has been reproduced hundreds of times, but never better and more simply than by Mr. E. V. Knox of *Punch*, in his collected volume of *Parodies Regained*:

Comrades, leave me here a little; all my heart is filled with song,
I shall be here very likely when they sound the luncheon gong.

The heroic poem called "Casabianca" seems to have provoked more parodies than any other verse in the world. The reason is that the episode it chronicles happened so long ago (in the Battle of the Nile, 1798) that most people have never heard of it, nor does the poem make it clear. All that the reader clearly understands is that:

The boy stood on the burning deck
Whence all but him had fled.

He does not know that Casabianca is the boy's name. Nor does he understand what the boy was doing on the burning deck or why the deck was burning, or why he didn't go. And the final inquiry, "The boy, oh where was he?" provokes an irritated answer. So naturally the parodist falls to it. The gallant self-sacrifice of a little boy would hold back his pen if he understood it, but he doesn't. Away he goes:

The boy stood on the burning deck
His baggage checked to Troy,
His overcoat was round his neck
His name was P. Mulloy.

(etc., etc.)

Very often a parody is a parody only in form, its new meaning being just as intense, even though cast in a comic mold, as that of the poem which it imitates. Mr. Knox's poem, "The Tryst," which tries to "show how a Victorian poet might have handled a Russian love idyll of the present day," is a case in point:

Come into the garden, Kate,
For the green rat visions go;
Come into the garden, Kate,
I am standing here in the snow;
And the seeds of the sunflower will not wait
And the vodka is getting low.

.

I said to the lamp-post, "Tell me how
I came to be here in the dirt,
When Katka is dancing, dancing now,
Katka is playing the flirt."

.

And the voice of the lamp said, "Follow, follow,
Be true to the people's will;
Don't lie there in the dirt and wallow."
And the moon said, "Kill, Kill, Kill!"

The parody need not be based on something exalted. It can be an adaptation of something which is itself funny, though commonly we do not use the word "parody" in this way. Yet there is no other term. Very often the final effect is far from funny. What for instance are we to say to this—an adaptation of Bret Harte's *Heathen*

Chinee?

THE HEATHEN PASS-EE
Being the Story of a Pass Examination
By Bred Hard

Which I wish to remark,
 And my language is plain,
That for plots that are dark
 And not always in vain,
The heathen Pass-ee is peculiar,
And the same I would rise to explain.

I would also premise
 That the term Pass-ee
Most fitly applies,
 As you probably see,
To one whose vocation is passing
 The “ordinary B.A. degree.”

Tom Crib was his name,
 And I shall not deny
In regard to the same
 What the name might imply,
But his face it was trustful and childlike,
 And he had the most innocent eye, etc., etc.

Most of us would know what we think of it, but, as the writer of it has been dead half a century, we need not be unkind about it. It appears here as a specimen does in a laboratory. Yet it is quoted in one of the best-selected anthologies of English Comic Verse.

But a much higher level is reached when the parody not only reproduces the original but reproduces it in such a way as to show its weakness—its oversentiment, its bombast or what not. In this case the parody is often better than the original for such a form of parody could not be made against a poem that was not faulty. *In this sense* one could no more parody “Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean” than he could parody the Sermon on the Mount.

Yet sometimes the parodist can be greatly daring and yet get away with it. Look

at this beautiful thing. Captain Harry Graham's name is mentioned so often in this book that I won't say he wrote it. But he did. The original is easily recognized.

For each man eats his favorite meats
Provided by his wife:
Or cheese or chalk, or peas or pork
(For such, alas!, is life).
The rich man eats them with a fork,
The poor man with a knife.

Everybody in America knows the popular and virtuous but rather twaddle-twaddle poem called *Maud Muller*. Maud, it appears, is out raking hay on her father's farm when Judge Jenkins rides past on his way to Court. Well, everyone knows what new-mown hay is, and summer time, and what judges are like! For half a minute the judge is inclined to leap from his horse, or at least slide off it, and go and say, "Come, I don't know you and your station seems pretty humble but that's all right, come and marry me." But he restrains the impulse and passes on, and thus their lives part for ever. And the poet says:

Yet the lawyers smiled that afternoon,
When he hummed in the Court an old love tune.

.

The poem ends with the reflection

Alas! for maiden, alas for Judge
For rich repiner and household drudge

.

For of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are these: "It might have been."

Now the theme of this poem may appeal to the young and romantic. But as adult common sense it is a little wobbly. Suppose that the judge had got off his horse and proposed to Maud Muller just because she had on a light blue print dress and was throwing hay round? He'd have been sorry in five minutes. She would have said, "Oh, Jedg, ain't you the Kidder, te-he!" And it would have been all off for him, but he'd have had to marry her.

This view of the episode was brought out by Bret Harte in his famous parody sequel "Mrs. Judge Jenkins." Those who have read it will certainly recall the charming stanza:

And thought of the twins and wished that they
Looked less like the men who raked the hay.

And the mournful close:

If, of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest are, "It might have been,"
More sad are these we daily see:
"It is, but hadn't ought to be."

There comes a higher stage of parasitic literature when it moves away from the single poem or story and reproduces and satirizes merely the type. In fact this represents the dividing line between parody and burlesque. The one is a reproduction of a particular thing, the other of a class. Thus in poetry one may take the once famous *Bon Gauthier Ballads* as satirizing, by means of burlesque, the heroic, the martial and the sentimental verse of early Victorian days.

Here we have a *Royal Banquet* in the days when the Queen was young:

The queen she kept high festival in Windsor's lordly hall,
And round her sat the gartered knights and ermined nobles all;
There drank the valiant Wellington, there fed the wary Peel,
While at the bottom of the board Prince Albert carved the veal.

Or take this, as voicing the indignation of the America of 1842 against the young Charles Dickens whose speeches on copyright had angered the hospitable nation:

Sneak across the wide Atlantic, worthless London's puling child,
Better that its waves should bear thee than the land thou hast reviled;
Better in the stifling cabin on the sofa thou shouldst lie,
Sickening as the fetid nigger bears the greens and bacon by.

It will be easily seen from the above examples that parody passes by a gradual transition from parody pure and simple to mock heroic verse, or, turning in another direction, moves into the higher realm of comic satire.

Poetry seems naturally better suited than prose for parody. The form of the verse invites a literal adaptation. But burlesque in the broader sense makes use of prose, reproducing not a particular author but a whole mode of writing. The form is so familiar to us as a current mode of humor that it hardly needs illustrations. George Ade in his *Fables* and Bob Benchley in all that he does—and on the other side of the Atlantic A. P. Herbert and Charles Graves, whenever they want to, are cases in

point.

One may even mention, with becoming modesty, the little book called *Nonsense Novels* that has had no small vogue in the last quarter of a century. The ten stories that make it up are not parodies of any particular stories or of any particular author. They reproduce types.

A higher variant of a burlesque is created when the type form of the story is used with an entirely new situation fitted into it. The new situation, though utterly different in time and place, has a queer similarity with the setting of the old story, and the mixed contrast and analogy become the basis of the humor.

Here are one or two examples, given at some length—with proper apologies, seeing that they are my own.

Everybody knows the types of the dear old Christmas stories, always the same and yet always new. A year or two ago I took some of the most familiar models of Christmas fiction and fitted them in with a few of the leading events of the British world of the day. The Editor of the *London Spectator* will at least remember them.

I took, for example, the well-known Christmas story of the stern old earl. All his life he had sacrificed affection to rigid principle, had sacrificed love to prejudice, and repelled, by the unforgiving sternness of his creed, the affection of those who should have been dearest to him. On Christmas Eve he relents and all is changed. Now observe how this beautiful old story could be revived and applied to the existing tariff situation in England, with Lord Snowden cast for the leading part.

I—STORY OF THE REPENTANT EARL

It was Christmas Eve. The stern old Earl sat in his library, his stern old face bent over his desk with its usual stern expression. He was alone in the library. It was late. The fire had burned low.

The stern old Earl wrote on. But as his hand moved over the paper somehow the sternness seemed to die out of his face, and leave in it nothing but the human kindness for which nature long ago had framed it. For he wrote thus:

My dear Stanley,—Of late I have been thinking things over and I have come to realize that I have been wrong. I see now that all my ideas about free trade arose only from pride and prejudice. This I must now cast aside. For years I believed, or tried to believe, that industry was limited by the quantity of

capital, and that a demand for commodities was not a demand for labor. This led me, as I now freely confess to you, my dear boy, to think that value under free competition was governed by the cost of production, and that unrestricted international trade supplied all consumers with a maximum of goods at a minimum of cost. I see now that this was wrong and wicked, and while I still have time I must try to set it right—

The old Earl paused. He looked up from the paper before him with an expression of firm resolution. For a moment, as the eye noted above his desk the portrait of Adam Smith, he seemed to hesitate. Then speaking to himself out loud, he said:

“No, no; I’ll do better than write. I’ll tell the boy now.”

He pulled the bell rope, and to the aged butler who entered he asked:

“Can you tell me if Mr. Stanley has gone to bed?”

“I think not, my lord. I think he is still in his sitting room.”

“And Master Ramsay and Master Neville?”

“In bed, I think, my lord.”

“Very good. Please do not disturb them. But will you ask Mr. Stanley to be kind enough to come down for a moment.”

“Grandfather!” exclaimed Stanley as he stepped, with outstretched hands, across the threshold of the library from which he had been banished for months.

The old Earl clasped the lad to his breast.

“My boy,” he said, striving to control the emotion in his voice, “it is Christmas Eve. I have done you a great wrong. I want to try to set it right while I can. I sat down to write to you, but I have found it easier and better to speak to you face to face. Stanley, I have been wrong about Free Trade.”

“Grandfather!”

“Wrong, utterly wrong,” continued the old Earl, with something like passion in his voice. “It is not true, Stanley, that value under free importation tends to equal the cost of production. I have been wrong, obstinate, pig-headed, but I see it now.”

“Not pig-headed, grandfather,” exclaimed Stanley, “not pig-headed; a little mulish if you like, but not that. But let me call Ramsay and Neville. Do, pray.”

“No, no,” said the Earl; “they are too young to understand.”

“Ramsay begins to understand about the tariff, grandfather,” said Stanley, “and little Neville seems to have always understood it. I’ll call them.”

But there was no need. Roused by the unwonted sound of voices in their grandfather’s library, little Ramsay and little Neville, still in their sleeping pyjamas, came bursting into the room.

“Ramsay! Neville!” cried Stanley. “Isn’t it wonderful! Grandfather has given up Free Trade.”

“Grandfather!” exclaimed the little boys.

And at that moment the sound of the church bells, tolling for Christmas Eve, came faintly on the air.

The old Earl moved across the room and drew back the heavy curtain from the French windows. Outside the bright snow and the air, crystaled with snowflakes, was bright with the moonlight.

“Look,” he said, “a fall of snow. That will mean a lot of work for the villagers. And work, my children, means wages; for it is true, my dear lads, that a demand for labor is really a demand for commodities.”

The old Earl threw open the window.

All four stood listening to the sound of the bells, now loud and clear.

“How beautiful the bells sound!” said little Ramsay.

“Beautiful indeed,” said the Earl. “We buy them in Belgium.”

“No, grandfather,” said little Neville gently, “in Birmingham.”

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II—STORY OF THE CHRISTMAS GHOST

(In this story, the most familiar and typical of all, a man, hitherto harsh and remorseless, has a dream of a ghost on Christmas Eve and wakes a changed being. The greatest of all our writers has immortalized the theme as a Christmas tale. But even he never realized the use he might have made of it to settle the most bitter of all political controversies. Here it is retold in its applied form.)

Mr. de Valera leaped from his bed in his London lodgings, still filled with the new resolution that had come to him as the result of his dream.

He threw open the window.

Christmas morning! Clear and bright and cold: cold piping for the blood to dance to: “Fine place this town!” thought Mr. de Valera. “Jolly morning for Christmas! Capital to be alive on such a day! Now then, for the new resolutions.”

Outside in the street was a boy, swinging on the area railings.

“Hi—you boy!” called Mr. de Valera, “can you tell me what town this is?”

“Why, London, to be sure!” replied the boy.

“Intelligent boy that,” thought Mr. de Valera, rubbing his hands. “London, eh? London in England?”

“Yes, sir, in England right enough,” said the boy.

“Ha! ha!” said Mr. de Valera, “and in the British Empire, eh?”

“Yes, sir, in the British Empire.”

“Smart boy that,” murmured Mr. de Valera. “In the British Empire, eh? The dear old Empire. Never broken up yet, I’ll be bound?”

“No, sir; never broken up.”

“Then, here’s a shilling for you. Now then, do you know the spot where they keep the Irish Land Annuities?”

“Oh, yes sir. Right around the corner. Commissioners of the National Debt. My eye! Do I know it? I saw a whole big bundle of them in the windows yesterday. Christmas sale, sir.”

“Do you think if I gave you some money you would go and buy me some?”

“How many do you want?”

“All they have!” said Mr. de Valera. “The whole lot.”

“Here,” he continued, throwing a tied-up bundle out of the window. “There’s a couple of million pounds. Buy the annuities, call a cab, and bring them back here and I’ll give you an Irish Free State Terminable Debenture. Off you go now, like a shot.”

Off like a shot! He would have been a quick hand with a gun who could have got a shot off half so fast.

When the boy came back with the Land Annuities—and they filled the whole cab—Mr. de Valera was standing fully dressed on the steps, his genial face beaming with benevolence.

“Right, my boy,” he said, as he handed the little fellow a 1975 debenture.

“Now then, cabby, in with those annuities into the hall here. Smartly

now, and I'll give you a Free State Consolidated Loan Coupon for 1981."

"My hat!" said the cabman.

"I'll fill it with annuities, if you like," said Mr. de Valera. And they both roared with laughter.

"Comic fellow the cabman," thought Mr. de Valera. "Genuine, hearty, English spirit.

"Now then, my man," he said, when the debentures were piled up in the hall—and they filled one side of it—"do you think you know the way to drive me to Buckingham Palace?"

"Buckingham Palace!" exclaimed the man. "Do I know it? Why I drove the King there last night!"

"Good! Then off we go."

"But they'll never let you in at this hour, sir," said the cabman. "It's too early."

"Won't they," chuckled Mr. de Valera as he got into the cab. "You just drive up and ring the bell and say that I've come to take the Oath of Allegiance!"

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Ever after that Mr. de Valera was a better and nobler man, a kinder father, an easier uncle and a more religious pew-holder. Often in his old age he used to say: "It is nobler and wiser to perform a good action when you can than wait till you have to."

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III—CHRISTMAS IN THE CASUAL WARD

(This dear old story of Christmas is laid in and around a great London hospital. There has been an accident on Christmas morning and—but let the story speak for itself, with only the preliminary explanation that if Mahatma Gandhi never was in London at Christmas time he might easily have been there.)

The pathetic figure on the little stretcher was carried up the steps of the great hospital.

"What is it?" asked the group of people who had gathered about the entrance.

“Street accident,” said the policeman (he was, of course, a burly policeman). “Poor chap!”

“Christmas, too,” said the doorman. “Hard luck!”

(The doorman had little doormen of his own at home.)

“Is he much hurt?” asked a sympathetic bystander.

(The unsympathetic ones hadn’t thought of this question.)

“Can’t live, I heard ’em say,” said the policeman. “Knocked down by a dray, I understand.”

“I saw it happen,” said a woman in the crowd. “Can’t say it was the drayman’s fault, either. The little chap didn’t seem to know where he was going. Kind o’ dazed like, queer in his mind and talking to himself. Wasn’t a white man, either; more like a Canadian or something.”

Upstairs in the ward a little group of nurses and house surgeons stood about the bed on which lay the pathetic little figure. They were waiting for the great specialist who had been hurriedly summoned. (It’s the only way to get them.)

“Do you know who he is?” asked one of the nurses.

The house surgeon shook his head. “No clue,” he said. “Linen, such as he had, marked ‘Gandhi, Bombay.’”

“Anything in that bundle he was carrying?”

“Nothing really to go on. Two spoons with a coronet, marked ‘Willingdon’; another spoon marked ‘United Service Club, Bombay.’ That was all.”

The conversation hushed as the great specialist, Sir Magnus Alhell, stepped into the ward.

He bent over the bed, removed the bedclothes and ran his trained hand over the poor shrunken chest and the feeble limbs of the little figure.

“Nothing there,” he murmured. “I find no injury.”

The patient opened his eyes.

“I refuse to coöperate,” he said. Then his eyes closed again.

“Can you answer my questions?”

“Yes, but I won’t,” came the faint reply as the eyes again opened.

“Yes, but you will,” said the great specialist. There was something in the touch of his hand, something in the mesmerism of his eye—the legacy of Hippocrates—that compelled the will of the patient.

“Now then,” said Sir Magnus. “When did you last have a square meal?”

“A *square* meal?”

“Yes, a square meal. Think; when?”

“Thirty years ago,” said the patient quietly. He spoke quite firmly now.

“And since then?”

“Never.”

“Never a beefsteak?”

“Never once.”

“Never had a Christmas dinner?”

“Yes, once,” said the patient, sitting half up. “At least that was what I had thirty years ago. It was a real English Christmas dinner.” He seemed to gather animation as he spoke. “We had turkey.”

“And cranberry sauce!” laughed Sir Magnus.

“Yes, and mashed potatoes.”

“And plum pudding?”

“Oh—yes, yes, plum pudding, all on fire with brandy and raisins and —”

“You see,” said the great specialist, turning to the little group; “it was simply a case of malnutrition, of underfeeding. If you young students,” he added, almost severely, “would only read a little old-fashioned Christmas literature, instead of sticking your heads into books of diagnosis, you would know that underfeeding is the cause not only of all the street accidents but of half the troubles of the world. This poor fellow—Gandhi is your name, isn’t it?—is merely underfed. All the trouble comes from that.”

Half an hour after, Mahatma Gandhi, propped up in bed, a napkin at his neck, a tray in front of him, devoured wing after wing of the turkey on his plate. Half a month after that, he weighed two hundred and fifty pounds.

Half a year after that, India became free (to take effect A. D. 3000). Its liberator always used to say, “It is better for my people to give up swaraj, suttee and thuggee, and stick to things like Bombay duck, chutney and chili con carne, where you know what you are getting.”

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IV—THE UNCLE FROM AMERICA

(Here is another familiar type of Christmas story that needs

political application. It is called "The Uncle from America" and is known in France as "L'Oncle d'Amérique." In the story the uncle of a certain family is supposed to have gone away to America, years and years ago, so long ago that his relations have lost all track of him. In reality he has made a great fortune, but they do not know it. The family themselves have had exactly the opposite fate and they have sunk from affluence to poverty; their home has been mortgaged and the mortgage has fallen due, as mortgages always do in fiction, on Christmas Eve. And then—well, everyone knows what happens. But here is the political and international application of it.)

The fatal evening had come. There was no help, no hope. The mortgage had fallen due; tonight it would be foreclosed, and Europa House, the fine old property that had come down for centuries in the family, must go under the hammer.

Good old Squire John Bull, the senior member of the family, restlessly paced the library floor, pausing at intervals to speak with a fair-haired gentleman who sat in an armchair, his good-humored countenance disfigured by an expression of utter dejection.

"It's too damn bad, Fritz," said John Bull. "I wish the rotten business was over and done and the papers signed. Let the damn fellow take the old place. A here's no help for it. You've no money, have you, Fritz?"

"Not a mark," he said. "Neither has Jacques nor Benito. Only paper, and he won't take it."

"Damn his impudence," said John Bull. "But never mind, Fritz. We'll stick it out together somehow. But here come the others. Come in, Jacques. Come in, Benito."

John Bull advanced to the door with outstretched hands, with something of his old glad hospitality in his face, shaking hands with his guests as they arrived.

"Come in, Jacques. Ah! and this is little Slovakia with you, is it? How are you, dear? And this I suppose is Cousin Polonia Corridor. My! But you have grown into a great girl! So Cousin Ivan wouldn't come, eh? Let him go to the devil in his own way. Angus, pour them out a glass of Scotch. It's there on the sideboard. Damn it, cousins, the old place is ours for half an hour yet, anyway. Stir up the fire, Patrick. Let's have a good blaze for the last one. Now then, you all know what the trouble is and

why you're here, so we won't mince matters. This damn American fellow has closed out the mortgage. Well, you've none of you any money, have you? What about you, Benito?"

"Money!" said Benito, a dark Italian-looking man, scarcely recognizable as cousin to John and Fritz, but resembling Jacques. "Money! Millions and millions! I have kept telling you."

"Then where is it?" said John Bull.

"I have told you," said Benito, "first lend me ten—a hundred million lire—and in ten years—"

The assembled family broke into laughter.

"In ten years, *mon cher* Benito," said Jacques, "we are all like that. Oh, it is sad to think of it. Behold us, a united family, loving one another, and now ruined by a stranger. Ah! if only Fritz had not made that sacred war!"

"Me make a war!" cried Fritz, jumping up. "It is to laugh! You made it, Jacques—you and Ivan!"

"I make the war!" shouted Jacques, "You insult my honor. You shall answer—"

"Gently, gently," said John Bull. "Remember we are all cousins."

"I never made the war," said Fritz, his face distorted with anger. "I love peace. You and Cousin John Bull here—"

"Damn your eyes, Fritz," said John Bull, clenching his fist. "I'm a peace-loving man, but—"

The room was filled with a very tumult. But at that moment a butler announced at the door:

"The American gentlemen are here, Mr. Bull." There was an instant silence as a tall man in a characteristic stovepipe hat and swallowtail coat, with a mustache and a long beard, walked into the room. He was followed by two others, evidently attorneys, who produced and spread out on the library table a bundle of documents which they carried.

"Well, gents and young ladies," said the Yankee, lighting a cigar without so much as asking permission, or even removing his hat. "All here, eh? Quite a family party! Sounded from your voices just now like a real affectionate powwow."

"Look here, sir," said John Bull, striding toward the American. "Do the business you are here for, but your damned insults you can keep to yourself. I won't have them."

“And I too not,” said Fritz.

“Nor me neither,” said Jacques.

“All right,” said the American quite unruffled. “I reckon money talks anyway. There’s the conveyance laid out on the table. You get a discharge of all you owe and I take over Europa House and the grounds, including the famous Concert Room and the Conservatory and the Moratorium. Now, gents, you can either put up or shut up. My pal there, Idaho Bill, will either take the money or give you a pen to sign with. Which is it?”

The Yankee’s manner as he looked at the assembled cousins seemed purposely and dramatically offensive. There was a moment of tense silence. Jacques’ hands were clenched in anger; Benito’s face was dark with rage; and Fritz’s keen eyes glittered like steel.

But John Bull stepped toward the table.

“Cousins,” he said; “there is no help for it. I am the oldest here. If there’s been any fault it’s mine as much as anyone’s. I’ll sign first.”

And then a strange thing happened.

“Wait a bit,” said the American. “I’ll just see these papers are in the shape they ought to be.”

He walked to the table, picked up the papers, carried them over to the fireplace, tore and crushed them into an indistinguishable mass, and threw them into the flames. Then, as he turned around again, he took off his stovepipe hat and false beard and stood smiling at the astonished family.

“Well, John,” he said. “Don’t you know me now?”

“God bless my soul!” exclaimed Squire Bull. “Sam! Sam! Why it’s Sam! Cousins! It’s your Uncle Sam from America!”

“Uncle Sam!” exclaimed everybody.

“Yes, sir,” said Uncle Sam. “Back from America, and back with a pile big enough to make the value of them papers look like two cents. Boys and girls, I’ve lived for years just for this. All the time I was working and making my pile I thought of this homecoming to the old place, to clear up the mortgages that I’d bought up one by one, and pay back some part of what I owe. You and I, John, were kids together. Fritz, it was your mother taught me music. Jacques, I knew your pa. He gave me a statue once. Come, cousins, fill ’em up to the health of the old house! We’ll mend and repair it till it’s grander than it ever was, and your Uncle Sam will pay the bill for the Reparations.”

And as he spoke, the Christmas bells rang out their message of Peace, including its Economic Consequences, and good will toward Americans.

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But a still higher range is found when burlesque is used to portray and to satirize not merely the written books of a period but the life and manners of the period itself. This is what Mr. Archibald Marshall has done in his account of the Birdikin Family that adorned the pages of *Punch* and has since appeared as a book.

The Victorian age was a great age. Its achievements in arts and arms, in science and in letters were unsurpassed. Greatest of all was its advance in human kindliness, in human sympathy with the poor, the lowly, the outcast. Its righteous anger and its copious tears helped to smite to pieces and to wash away the older cruelty of the law, the inhumanity of the prison, the bitter isolation of the workhouse. It heard the cry of the children and took them to its heart. The moral advance of the Victorian age has helped to open a new social world.

But just because it was great, it had the defects of its noble qualities. It ran easily to prudery and overdone morality, and the hypocrisy that apes the moral attitude. It dissolved feeling into sentiment and sat in a flood of tears. It became namby-pamby and self-righteous; and, while it kept for the most part its class system and its régime of status and privilege and the snobbery and subservience that disfigured it, it sought to hide it all under a make-believe of noble-mindedness and false equality. In other words it hatched out from its nest such a typical progeny as the *Birdikin Family*.

Here is the beginning of the book. Anyone who can read it without wanting to go on had better go back to his financial column in the *Economist*. He has no place here.

THE BIRDIKIN FAMILY

Chapter I

A Walk with Papa

“Come, children,” said Mrs. Birdikin, entering the breakfast-parlor where the four young Birdikins were plying their tasks under the supervision of Miss Smith, “your good Papa is now able to resume walking exercise and wishes that you should all accompany him on this fine morning, if Miss Smith will kindly consent to release you half an hour earlier than customary.”

Miss Smith, who occupied the position of governess at Byron Grove, the country seat of Mr. Birdikin, was a woman of decent but not lofty parentage, whom her employers treated almost as they would have done if her birth had been equal to her integrity. This toleration, which so well became persons of a superior station, was exhibited on this occasion by Mrs. Birdikin's asking *permission* of Miss Smith to cut short the hours devoted to study instead of issuing a *command*. Miss Smith was deeply conscious of the condescension thus displayed and replied in a respectful tone, "Indeed, ma'am, the advantages that my little charges will gain from the converse of my esteemed employer, while engaging in the healthful exercise of perambulation, would be beyond my powers to impart."

Mrs. Birdikin inclined her head in token of her appreciation of the propriety of Miss Smith's utter-ance and said, "Then go at once to your rooms, children, and prepare yourselves for the treat in store for you."

The four children trooped obediently out of the room, the two boys, Charles and Henry, politely making way for their sisters, Fanny and Clara; for, although their superiors in age, they had been taught to give place to the *weaker sex*, and invariably did so when either of their parents were by.

The *Birdikin Family* stands upon a lofty plane. It is, in character, far above all the ordinary efforts of parody and burlesque. Yet quite comparable with it in point of novelty and range, and indeed unique in all the field of parasitic literature is the new Sherlock Holmes Saga, the new Research Criticism of the lives of Holmes and Watson. In old French poetry, such as the *Chanson de Roland*, they had a way of saying "Who hasn't seen that hasn't seen anything." It applies to this. Yet unfortunately on this side of the Atlantic this new development is scarcely known and not at all to the general public.

Of all the range of parody and parasitic literature, good and bad, that ever was covered, the mass of literature connected with the name of Sherlock Holmes outranks everything else in sheer quantity. The great mass of it is commonplace, a lot of it is beneath attention, but at least it has enlisted some of the famous pens of the world. In its latest phase—the new Sherlock Holmes Higher Criticism—it stands at the very top plane of the humor of amusement.

The whole phenomenon of Sherlock Holmes is extraordinary. His rise, emergence, and dominance is one of the most notable things in the history of ideas.

No Arabian genie that ever came from a magic bottle, and rolled in smoke, vast and portentous, across the world, is more marvelous. Only a few characters in the world's literature have anything of the same reaction upon the world's thought—perhaps, Don Quixote, Hamlet and Mr. Pickwick—certainly very few.

It appears now from letters and memoirs that Conan Doyle grew to hate Sherlock Holmes intensely, was utterly jealous of him, and would have killed him if he could. Quite naturally, Sherlock Holmes, once out of the bottle, overtowered his liberator, overwhelmed his identity, absorbed him. Sherlock Holmes, multiplied by millions in common speech, in common thought, by book, by cinema, by joke, spread around the world. In vain Doyle had sought to check him, had spread stories that Holmes was a drug fiend, that his knowledge was limited and his power restricted. The world saw otherwise. It saw in Holmes the embodied spirit of human reason, the power of mind over circumstance, and it fell down in recognition that reached idolatry. In a primitive age that had no printing and had no certainty of record, Sherlock and Watson would have become twin gods, associated like Castor and Pollux. Holmes would appear in mythology as the God of Deduction and Watson as the God of Truth.

Even in our world Sherlock has long since become an Idea which corresponds to a god in the ancient world. Conan Doyle ceased to have anything to do with him. It is true that Conan Doyle had first “revealed” Sherlock Holmes to the world, just as Joe Smith, the founder of Mormonism, revealed his golden tablets from the caves, or as a “medium” reveals a spirit. But Sherlock soon broke loose from his interpreter's control. He dragged the unwilling Doyle after him, pleading and protesting; and when Doyle could write no more, Sherlock set up for himself as an Idea. Masses of Sherlock Holmes jokes, references and stories exist quite apart from Conan Doyle.

It is contrary to the conventions of English literature today for other writers to write complete stories of Sherlock Holmes except as parodies or adaptations. It used to be done, as when the unspeakable G. W. M. Reynolds wrote further books about Mr. Pickwick. And other nations do it now. It is understood that the Spanish and Latin American press runs “Sherlock Holmes stories” with complete license and without public disapproval.

In other words Sherlock Holmes has become with us like Reynard the Fox in the middle ages—everybody's thought and everybody's property. He is undoubtedly today the most widely known character in fiction. Beside him, Hamlet and Pickwick, though they may stand next to him, are a long way down. Anyone who will think about this will see that it is true; all city people of all classes go to moving pictures,

and all moving picture audiences understand, every one of them, a reference to Sherlock Holmes. Now ask the people outside of the cities, the people in the wilderness—let us say, Canadian lumbermen running logs up north; use the phrase “a regular Sherlock Holmes.” Of course they know it. Niggers in equatorial Africa, Eskimos in an Igloo, labor delegates in a saloon, professors in a college—they all know it.

Now the Sherlock Holmes story lends itself to parody better than any other conceivable type. It almost invites it. Here is a frame already, a setting—the theme of marvelous deduction from small details unnoted by the ordinary observer. More than that—the very fact that the idea is unique, is extreme, is carried to a great length, makes it invite a parody. It does not mean that anybody and everybody could write a parody, but anybody and everybody might want to.

Take an example. Holmes looks at Watson’s watch, examines it in deep thought, turns his lens upon it, then hands it back to him and tells him how it reveals the pathetic story of his brother, dead years and years before, a drunkard but with alternating periods of efforts at reform.

Watson “springs from his chair” indignant. “This is unworthy of you, Holmes,” he says. “You have made inquiries into the history of my unhappy brother and you now pretend to deduce this knowledge in some fanciful way! It is unkind.”

“My dear doctor,” answers Holmes, “I assure you that I never knew you had a brother until you handed me the watch.”

This, of course, is priceless, “impayable,” beyond words. Probably this passage (from the opening chapter of the *Sign of the Four*) enslaved more of us to Sherlock than anything else he ever did.

Yet see how it challenges parody. Show him a watch and he’ll tell you about your brother. All right let’s show a cuff link and hear about grandfather. And with that the current of the narrative flows on, as regular as perspective, as orderly as Euclid. How to begin? Thus:

“*We were sitting in our Baker Street rooms.*”

Exactly: where else would they be?, and then what happens?

They look across the street and see someone.

What do they do?

They deduce him.

Precisely. And what does he do?

Appears a moment later at the door with Mrs. Hudson.

And what does he want?

He wants to know if either of them is Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

And *is* either of them?

Oh, yes, Sherlock is.

Then what does the man do next?

He heaves a deep sigh and is about to collapse.

What do they do for that?

They give him whiskey.

Do they take any themselves?

Yes; Watson needs it because he got hit by an Afghan bullet in the heel seven years before. So they both take some.

Does the man then make an astounding disclosure?

He does; Holmes thinks it's the most astounding one they've struck since the case of the *Prince of Belgravia and the lost hunting flask*.

And what does Watson say?

He reminds Holmes of the case where Moriarty stole one of the hotels off the Rue de Rivoli.

What do they do about this disclosure?

They solve it.

Then what?

Holmes plays the violin.

And Watson?

He takes some more whiskey; his Afghan wound is hurting again.

Can anyone wonder at the number of adaptations and parodies that have grown about the Sherlock legends? Among the cleverest is Sir James Barrie's, quoted with delight by Conan Doyle in his *Memories and Adventures*. Among the conspicuous failures are Mark Twain's parody, deserving only to be forgotten; and equally notable in its failure the attempt made by O. Henry.

But perhaps one of the best of the parasitic Sherlock Holmes themes is the little story told by Conan Doyle himself which needs to be reproduced in his own words.

"There are certain Sherlock Holmes stories," wrote Sir Arthur in the *Memories and Adventures*, "apocryphal I need not say, which go round and round the press and turn up at fixed intervals with the regularity of a comet.

"One is the story of the cabman who is supposed to have taken me to an hotel in Paris. 'Dr. Doyle,' he cried, gazing at me fixedly, 'I perceive

from your appearance that you have recently been at Constantinople. I have reason to think also that you have been at Buda, and I perceive some indication that you were not far from Milan.’ ‘Wonderful! Five francs for the secret of how you did it.’ ‘I looked at the labels pasted on your trunk,’ replied the astute cabby.”

But all of the parodies and adaptations and such are thrown into the shade by the new Critical Studies of Sherlock Holmes, started in England a few years ago, and now turning into a sort of field of research. As humor—meaning always the humor of amusement and not the higher humor that mingles tears with laughter—I know of nothing on so high a plane. Here are:

F. Knox, *Essays in Satire*; S. C. Roberts, *Dr. Watson*: (1931); H. W. Bell, *Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson*: (1932); T. S. Blakeney, *Sherlock Holmes: Fact or Fiction*: (1932); V. Starrett, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*: (1934); and *Baker Street Stories*: (edited by H. W. Bell: 1934).

All these books start with the whimsical assumption that Holmes and Watson really lived; that their adventures really happened. Consequently, if there are any seeming discrepancies in the narrative, we must investigate them with the same industry and patience as modern scholarship applies to the text of Shakespeare or to the New Testament. We must feel convinced that truth is truth and everything will come right if we only apply to it earnest thought and diligent investigation.

Now as a matter of fact Conon Doyle wrote the stories over a period that lasted thirty years and more. As they multiplied, not even their creator could keep track of them. They are full of discrepancies—which, of course, in point of art, don’t matter a particle. Watson is called John in one story and James in another. His wife dies and gets resurrected—and much else. All of which serves as a background for the most wonderful and delightful humor. To enter into it is like passing through a wall into a garden. It is like stepping into *Alice in Wonderland*.

Take the case of Watson’s wound. When he is first introduced to the reader he is a retired Army surgeon, knocked out in the Afghan War (in 1880) by a jezail bullet in the battle of Maiwand. What a jezail bullet is I do not know, but it sounds just the thing to be knocked out with. At any rate one of them wounded Dr. Watson in the shoulder and “shattered the bone.” Then in a later story Conan Doyle, quite naturally forgetting the details, in the accumulating mass of Sherlock stuff, wounded Watson in the leg. At least Watson is made to tell us that he sat “nursing his wounded leg.” It

seems he “had had a jezail bullet through it” some time before. Later on Conan Doyle gave him another nasty crack, this time in the heel. Naturally the effect of these three jezail bullets—or one hitting him three times—was to make Watson limp pretty badly. We read of the discomfort he suffered on one of their expeditions which to him was a “six mile limp.” Then a little later Conan Doyle apparently forgot about Watson’s limp and has him running at full speed. In fact Watson even boasts of the pace he can make. “I am reckoned fleet of foot,” he says; and we read of such further feats as Watson “rushing madly from the room,” and “dashing through the Arcade.” Jezail bullets couldn’t stop a man like that.

Of course the explanation is as obvious as it is amusing. Conan Doyle regarded the whole thing as fiction and didn’t waste time in looking up inconsistencies.

But the reviewers go solemnly to work with mock gravity and mimic scholarship, piecing it all together as if it were a concordance of the Gospels. Thus Mr. H. W. Bell “examines the data” in regard to Watson’s wound; concludes that he was hit twice, not three times, the bullet in his heel affecting his leg. In spite of his earlier despondency about himself he made a marvelous recovery, was able to run, leap, and dash. But, with British reticence, he kept it to himself.

Equally good is the vexed problem of Watson’s second wife. One critic devotes a whole book to her. Her case stands as follows:

In the book called the *Sign of the Four* Conan Doyle, following the unfortunate tradition of English fiction, brought in a heroine and a love story and in the end married Watson—jezail bullets and all—to Miss Mary Morrison. He set him up in practice and no doubt thought he was done with him. But the relentless Sherlock Holmes saga refused to let go of its interpreter. The stories had to go on. Watson had to keep leaving his practice, often for days at a time. Mrs. Watson became a nuisance and had to die. So Watson becomes a widower, with lots of time to deduce things. But later on, by a slip of memory, Conan Doyle makes Watson and Sherlock refer to Watson’s wife as if still alive. The critics at once seize on this, and prove from it that Watson has married again, and reconstruct from internal evidence the time and circumstance of his second marriage.

Best of all perhaps is the case of Holmes’s journey to Tibet. Readers of the Holmes stories will remember how Conan Doyle—thoroughly tired of Sherlock whom he felt to be an incubus on his work—got rid of him by having the arch-criminal Professor Moriarty throw him down a gorge in Switzerland. When Holmes is resurrected later on—being indestructible—he tells Watson that he has spent the two years of his disappearance in a journey to Tibet.

Of course Conan Doyle only sent him to Tibet because it sounds like the end of

nowhere. Beyond that it has no significance whatever. But the critics of the new school solemnly discuss the date of Holmes' journey, assigning it to 1892 and 1894. The climax of absurdity is reached by Mr. T. S. Blakeney in trying to work out by what route Holmes entered Tibet. He expresses surprise that he hadn't "attracted attention."

"Possibly he approached that isolated country from some other direction than India, where the chances of being recognized would be greater than elsewhere, and where the obstacles to penetrating into the Forbidden Land were likely to be prohibitive. Perhaps he obtained permission from the Russian authorities to travel through Central Asia, thus anticipating General Waters in his journeyings in Transcaspia and Samarkand three years later, and being the fore-runner of Sir Aurel Stein in Chinese Turkestan. We incline to think he may have entered Tibet from the northwest, with Charklik, perhaps as his starting point. Had he approached from Kashmir, he would almost certainly have attracted attention, as Captain Bower was then commencing his travels from Ladak to China. Similarly, Mr. Rockhill would surely have heard of Holmes, had the latter approached from the northeast. A journey from Charklik through, say, the Tsaidam basin, skirting the Koko-shili mountains to the east, and thence south to Lhasa, would break new ground, M. Bonvalot having taken a more westerly route to Tengri-nor via the Chi-chang-tso a year or two before. It is likely that Holmes returned via Khotan to Kashgar, and thence via Persia to Arabia, and eventually Khartoum."

But as if to show that not even the Tibet journey represents the climax, the critics are now working still more novel and audacious theories. Was Sherlock Holmes all that he pretended to be? Was Watson really as truthful and honorable as he makes himself out? Is it not conceivable that they were really a couple of crooks who planned the crimes, or at least some of them, themselves and fastened them on innocent victims by means of Sherlock's diabolical talent? That affair of the Priory School—involving the abduction of the Duke of Holderness's little son—looks at least pretty fishy. Indeed one might almost feel certain that it is a case of blackmail. Holmes's mysterious brother "Mycroft" is easily shown to be a crook. Is Holmes perhaps the same man as "Professor Moriarty," whom he is supposed to be hunting down?

And so on, endlessly; for thank goodness this vast piece of cheerful and

wholesome nonsense seems only beginning.

Appended to this chapter on the technique of humor connected with the use and misuse of words, may be set the special instance of the humor of translation and mistranslation from a foreign language. Words when misused become “funny.” It is, as with the simple pun or misspelling, the primitive humor of degradation and destruction. But when words are misused to convey as it were by accident a new and appropriate meaning, the effect is of a higher class. So it is with translation. The simplest effects are purely verbal, with no particular meaning to them. Thus schoolboy mistranslations of Latin depend mainly for their fun on the degradation of the dignified text with a trivial parallel. Virgil wrote:

Conticuere omnes, intentique ora tenebant (*Aeneid*. Bk. II. l. 1), giving us a picture of hushed silence and rapt attention. The schoolboy finds pleasure in the mock translation:

They were all County Kerry men and sat with their mouths open.

But there is nothing in this beyond the mere verbal effect, no real juxtaposition of the civilization and manners of Kerry County with those of Rome.

Compare similarly the well worn story of the English-speaking German in a London restaurant who announced to the waiter:

“After I have had my soup I will become a Welsh rabbit.”

The astonished waiter stood, watching for it to happen.

But of a higher range is the scene in the charming comedy called *Ici on parle français* in which some one inquires in a shop which bears that sign, “*Qui est la personne ici qui parle français?*” The young man behind the counter bows deeply and answers “*Je!*”

The error in the subtle idiom reaches further than words, and satirizes (crashes down) the pretense of foreigners to speak in idiomatic language.

Beyond such simple illustrations there opens up a great vista of errors, mistakes, false genders, wrong plurals, mixed suffixes—enough to fill a book. Here belongs similarly the humorous effect of all manner of mispronunciations of dialect, of nigger language and such things. Thus it is funny when a Jew says “*vel! vel!*” instead of saying “*well! well!*”

Similarly all mispronunciations are funny that arise from the foreigner’s inability to

pronounce our sounds just as we do. I remember hearing a distinguished Italian soldier during the war time speak to the Canadian Club in Montreal. He asked rhetorically: "What has Italy done in the war? Italy has held for France *the Bacador!*" That is the way the club heard it. The members gathered that it must be one of those districts of which no one ever heard till the great War, such as the Sanjak of Novi Bazar, and Teschen and such. So when the general said that Italy "had held the Bacador," there was great applause. But in reality he was only trying to say that Italy had "*held the back door.*"

"Nigger talk" is funny not so much in the single word as all through, in its general quality, each word and almost every syllable being a little off center. The effect of it is often heightened by an undercurrent of chuckling and clicking laughter, straight out of Equatorial Africa, a parody of our own articulation.

The humor of Negro talk moves on to higher ground when it turns not merely on sounds but on sense, or on the lack of it, and satirizes the Negro's fondness for long words, by which he confuses length of sound with depth of meaning.

Taken by and large, however, practically all the effects explained above are quite elemental—mere confusion of sound—the humor of smashing up language. They offer but little interest in the way of the scientific analysis of humor.

But something much higher is attained when the humor of mere language is used to bring out the humor of character—the humor of national differences, the incongruities and contrasts existing (or supposed to exist) between opposed national types. This is beautifully illustrated in a scene in Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend*. Here we see "a French Gentleman" conversing, at an evening reception, with the Super-British Mr. Podsnap. The fun is drawn, with equal good nature, from the peculiarities of both nationalities.

"Do you find, sir," said Mr. Podsnap, "many evidences that strike you of our British constitution on the streets of the world's metropolis, London, Londres, London?"

The foreign gentleman begged to be pardoned but did not altogether understand.

"The Constitution Britannique," Mr. Podsnap explained, as if he were teaching an infant class. "We say British—but you say Britannique, sir. The constitution—"

The foreign gentleman said, "Mais, yees, I know eem."

"I was inquiring," resumed Mr. Podsnap, "whether you have

observed upon our streets as we should say, upon the Pavvy, as you would say, any tokens—”

The foreign gentleman with patient courtesy inquired, “But what was tokens?”

“Marks,” said Mr. Podsnap, “signs, you know, traces—”

“Ah! Of a ‘orse’?” inquired the foreign gentleman.

“We call it ‘Horse,’” said Mr. Podsnap, “in England, Angleterre, we aspirate the H, and say Horse.”

“Pardon,” said the foreign gentleman, “I am always wrong.”

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Mark Twain found means to heighten the amusement of mistranslation by multiplying it by two. His “Jumping Frog” is first translated into French and then retranslated back into English. The effect is quite unforgettable.

It is impossible here to quote more than the opening sentences of the “Jumping Frog”—as originally written in (Western) English, as translated into Parisian French in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* (July 15th 1872—at least Mark Twain says so), and as re-translated by Mark Twain into literal English. Not even the triple inscription on the Rosetta Stone is of greater interest. The curious may find the entire story in the volume *Sketches New and Old*.

There was a fellow here once by the name of Jim Smiley, in the winter of '49—or maybe it was the spring of '50—I don't recollect exactly, somehow, though what makes me think it was one or the other is because I remember the big flume warn't finished when he first come to the camp; but anyway, he was the curiosest man about always betting on anything that turned up you ever see, if he could get anybody to bet on the other side; and if he couldn't he'd change sides. Any way that suited the other man would suit him—any way just so's he got a bet, he was satisfied. But still he was lucky, uncommon lucky; he most always come out winner. He was always ready and laying for a chance; there couldn't be no solit'ry thing mentioned but that feller'd offer to bet on it, and take ary side you please, as I was just telling you.

Il y avait une fois ici un individu connu sous le nom de Jim Smiley: c'était dans l'hiver de 49, peut-être bien au printemps de 50, je ne me rappelle pas exactement. Ce qui me fait croire que c'était

l'un ou l'autre, c'est que je me souviens que le grand bief n'était pas achevé lorsqu'il arriva au camp pour la première fois, mais de toutes façons il était l'homme le plus friand de paris qui se pût voir, pariant sur tout ce qui se présentait, quand il pouvait trouver un adversaire, et, quand il n'en trouvait pas il passait du côté opposé. Tout ce qui convenait à l'autre lui convenait; pourvuqu'il eût un pari, Smiley était satisfait. Et il avait une chance! une chance inouïe: presque toujours il gagnait. Il faut dire qu'il était toujours prêt à s'exposer, qu'on ne pouvait mentionner la moindre chose sans que ce gaillard offrît de parier là-dessus n'importe quoi et de prendre le côté que l'on voudrait, comme je vous le disais tout à l'heure.

This is then re-translated into English as follows:

It there was one time here an individual known under the name of Jim Smiley; it was in the winter of '49, possibly well at the spring of '50, I no me recollect not exactly. This which me makes to believe that it was the one or the other, it is that I shall remember that the grand flume is not achieved when he arrives at the camp for the first time, but of all sides he was the man the most fond of to bet which one have seen, betting upon all that which is presented, when he could find an adversary; and when he not of it could not, he passed to the side opposed. All that which convenienced to the other, to him convenienced also; seeing that he had a bet, Smiley was satisfied. And he had a chance! a chance even worthless; nearly always he gained. It must to say that he was always near to himself expose, but one no could mention the least thing without that this gaillard offered to bet the bottom, no matter what, and to take the side that one him would, as I you it said all at the hour.

Mark Twain may have got his idea for making this “Jumping Frog” version from a like performance that had been done in dead earnest a little while before. This was Senhor Pedro Carolino’s *New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English*. Carolino wrote it from a serious desire to come to the help of Portuguese and Brazilian youths who at that time had no decent textbooks to learn English from. Unluckily the author himself didn’t know English; but he pieced out his ignorance by using a book of Portuguese-French phrases and an English-Portuguese dictionary. The result is miraculous.

The Portuguese author explains in a preface that he compiled the *Guide* because the existing books for learning English were so unreliable. “The works which we were conferring (he means “consulting”) for this labour found use us for nothing: those what were publishing to Portugal, or out, they were almost all composed for some foreign, or for some national little acquainted in the spirit of both languages.”

Senhor Carolino proposes to step into this gap:

“A choice,” he says, “of familiar dialogues, clean of gallicisms and despoiled phrases, it was missing yet to studious Portuguese and Brazilian Youth. We sought all we may do to correct that want. . . . We expect then, who the little book (for the care we have wrote him and for her typographical correction) that may be worth the occupation of the studious person, and especially of the Youth, at which we dedicate him particularly.”

When the studious youth get busy they find in the book, first of all, carefully prepared lists of nouns arranged in classes. Thus one useful list is that of “Ecclesiastical Dignitaries” which includes such people as “a canon,” “a theologist” and “a penitentiary.” Then come “Familiar Phrases” such as: “Have you say that?” “At what purpose have you say so?” “How do you can it to deny?” Or such more complicated thoughts as appear in the highly idiomatic sentences: “He has me take out my hairs.” “He does me some kicks.” “He burns one’s self the brains.” And the crowning feat represented by: “He do the devil at four.”

The studious youth are thus led on until they are able to grasp what are called English “Idiotisms.” Knowing the sporting tastes of the English, the instructor takes care to put in special help in the way of conversations on hunting and fishing. One Portuguese gentleman is supposed to ask: “There is it some game in this wood?” and to receive the cheering answer: “Look a hare who run! Let aim it! Let make fire him!”

They get the hare all right. At least one Portuguese says: “I have put down killed!”

Then they turn to fishing. “That pond,” suggests one, “it seems me many multiplied of fishes.” The other sportsman is right on at once. “Here,” he says, “there is a wand and some hooks,” “Silence, there is a superb perch!” “You mistake you, it is a frog. Dip it again in the water.”

The Portuguese boys having now pretty well completed their training are ready

to go out into the world. They get a final touch in being shown how to write a love letter.

My lady I have a complaint to present you. So much happy that be one's self, one have not all their eases in this world. Your letters are shortest. You have plaid wonderfully all sentiments: less her prattle etc.

The last sentence, after fifty years, still defies interpretation.

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In point of analysis the humor of the Portuguese Grammar does not rest only on the clash and contrariety of words. There is the higher incongruity as between the usual dignity of academic instruction, and its "degradation" with the ridiculous trash of the grammar. It owes something also to the nerve and dead certainty of the teacher as contrasted with his real ignorance.

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A vein of humor similar in its essence to that of mistranslation is found in the way in which nations borrow the words from one another's language and use them wrongly. Quite naturally international intercourse involves the import of words along with the things they stand for. The Chinese gave us *tea* and the Arabs gave us *coffee*. England has exported to France a whole series of words dealing with railways and golf and tennis, and imported in return useful phrases in regard to cooking and love. But along with the legitimate imports and exports are a whole lot of other terms, that have been "bootlegged" as it were from language to language, with the same effect on the purity of language as bootlegging has on the purity of liquor.

Thus a Frenchman, when he puts on a dinner jacket, is under the impression that he is wearing "un smoking." Thus attired in his "smoking" he makes his way to a "saloon" of "the high life" where a "five-o'clock" is in progress. Here in point of refreshment he will find at least what he understands to be a "song-wich." If really hungry he even asks for "un beking." In asking for this he is under the impression that he is calling for "bacon and eggs."

At the reception in the saloon he will meet a number of what he calls "Mees," who are "chaparoned" (as they call it, though he doesn't) by their mothers, whom the French gentleman recognizes as very "respectable women." (The French always spoke of Queen Victoria as a "most respectable old woman.")

Here too he will meet his aristocratic English friends—"Sir Smith" and "Sir Jones." He gives to each a "shakehands" and is proud to see in the room several

“milords” and even “Sir Mac de Dougall of the Scotland.”

And incidentally the Englishman or the American, when he tries to interlard his own language with what he thinks to be French, is just as bad—or worse.

With which, one may conclude in the words of the Portuguese Grammar. “How do you can it to deny?” . . .

CHAPTER IV

TECHNIQUE OF THE GREATER HUMORISTS: CHARLES DICKENS AND MARK TWAIN

The Two Greatest Humorists of All Time—Their Merits and Their Defects—Their Contrasted Fields and Methods—Technique of Their Work—Their Highest Reach Attains the Same Supreme Goal.

One turns from words to things; from the verbal forms, which are only the mechanics of humor, to those incongruities and antitheses of circumstance and character which are its base. As already said, humor resting on words alone is only for the nursery, the schoolroom and for odd moments. It is in proportion as the mere oddity of sound combines with it a significant incongruity or antithesis between apparent and real meaning, in other words involves a new idea, that humor moves upward in the scale. It reaches its real ground when it becomes the humor of situation and character; and, at its highest reach, laughter fades into a smile that verges closely upon tears, when humor reflects the incongruity of life itself, of our human lot. It runs thus a gamut which passes all the way from the ridiculous to the sublime.

But it is difficult to present or to discuss this humor of character without the quotation of whole books, or at least whole chapters, at a time—or the assumption that all readers know them. This unfortunately is not so. In a “highbrow” circle of literary pedants one could bandy back and forward literary references from Aristotle to Zeno, from Athalie to Zadig and from Anthony the Absolute to Zane Grey. But for ordinary people such indiscriminate allusions are mere confusion; the more so as most people hesitate to admit how much they haven’t read. When a literary person says: “Take Ariosto,” or “take Bossuet,” the answer ought to be “I won’t.”

So for the present discussion of the modern humor of character, I have seen fit to select the two writers, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Not only are their names, the one English, the other American, preëminent in the modern world, but their books are the most widely read. If we take any period of twenty consecutive years, not of twenty consecutive months, the books of Dickens and Mark Twain are more widely read than anything else in fiction. The others come and go. The “best sellers” of ten years ago are already forgotten.

One admits that the eminence of both these authors, especially that of Mark

Twain, is marred by lapses from their greatness. It is a long drop from the top reach of Mark Twain's eminence in *Huckleberry Finn* to his lowest mark. Other authors, below Dickens and Mark Twain as a whole, are far more even. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, kept a far more uniform standard of excellence, but, and least of all in point of humor, never reached so high. Mark Twain, indeed, had a peculiar capacity for degenerating into drivel. He would take some more or less copybook theme, such as that of *The \$30,000 Bequest*, namely that it is better to be content with what we have than to dream of riches which we don't possess. Then he would dress it up with an elaborate and fantastic surrounding, put into it characters that are mere names and not people at all, and then drivel along till he ran out. At the height of Mark Twain's prestige he would get away with this. But it is different now. Many young people strike this kind of thing and ever after "don't care for Mark Twain." The license that comes with phenomenal and sustained success opens the way wide to prolixity. The minute a man is convinced that he is interesting, he isn't.

Dickens, too, ran by temperament to sentimentality and was easily led, writing, as he willfully did, like a hack journalist tied by the day and by the column, to substitute false effects for real ones and to replace the effortless art of his earlier work by the jaded artifice that so often disfigures his later. All through his work, indeed, the humor of Charles Dickens is thus disfigured by the sentiment and sentimentality so often linked with it. At times the flood of tears turns his page to a very morass of sentimentality. It was the failing of the age. Victorian sentiment was needed to wash away the hardness and the inhumanities of the preceding ages—the brutal prisons, the savage law, the "cry of the children." The tears fell on these like April rain on northern ice. But sentiment easily passes into sentimentality, in which the expression of emotion goes beyond legitimate bounds. To this Dickens easily succumbs; tears become maudlin, pathos passes into hiccoughs, and noble indignation snorts off into bombast and rodomontade. Witness Mrs. Annie Strong—the erring wife in *David Copperfield*—delivering a round-robin general confession and apology to all present, punctuated with sobs. Compare Kate Nickleby handing out to her uncle about three hundred consecutive words of "heroine's indignation" against bad men; or old Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, whose accumulated disasters and Christian fortitude are as tiresome as they are incomprehensible.

Thus Dickens at his worst runs to sentimental drivel. Not so Mark Twain. He never bothered much about the poor; at least he never cried over them. The West had made him tough. He denounced injustice and political wrong, but he did it in flaring invective, in raw coarse language, not in sobs. Take as typical his fierce denunciation of Leopold, King of the Belgians, in connection with the atrocities on

the Congo. For him Mark Twain proposed an epitaph: "Here under this gilded tomb lies rotting the body of one the smell of whose name may still offend the nostrils of man ages upon ages after all the Cæsars and Washingtons and Napoleons shall have ceased to be praised or blamed, and been forgotten."

Dickens would have sought his effect in such a case with a sustained description of the lingering death of moaning Negroes, forgiving "Massa Leopold" with their dying breath: followed by a clarion call, beginning: "Oh Ye, whose eager call for Rubber has vulcanized your hearts and turned you into rubber-necks—" and so on, until they are thoroughly ashamed of themselves.

But Mark Twain had his own special failing in prolixity. Especially as he grew older, he was reckless in his egotistical demand on the reader's time and attention. When he wanted to convey the impression of an interminable harangue, he made an interminable harangue; in order to ridicule the boredom of a long story he recites the whole long, boring story. Witness, in the *Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*, the long tales put into the mouth of the girl Alisande to show how tiring she was. She certainly was, but so was Mark Twain.

But take it all in all, with a full recognition of their respective shortcomings, which perhaps alienate many present readers of the rising generation, these two men—Charles Dickens, who ceased to be Boz, and Mark Twain, who ceased to be Samuel Clemens—represent the highest reach of the written humor of the nineteenth century. Perhaps they represent more than that. For it is at least open to argument whether certain phases of art did not reach their highest point at that time, leaving Dickens and Mark Twain representing the world's supreme reach in their own field. The nineteenth century was the era of the printed word, just as the twentieth is becoming the era of the flickering shadow and the metal voice. We cannot have everything all at once. We must pay a certain compensating price for the wonderful things which our new technical equipment enables us to see and to do.

Our literary and artistic impressions move past us in an unending stream. Each gives place instantly to the next. There can be for the children of today little or nothing of the profound life impressions made upon the minds of those of fifty years ago, reading by the firelight in the treasured page of a tattered book. The moving picture has enormously emphasized the humor of what we see, visual effects. The radio is striving to make a new humor of what we hear and don't see. The whole of our present environment lays a tremendous stress on rapidity, on getting things over fast; it is a world of flickering shadows and rushing voices. Already the books of forty years ago seem strange; booksellers call them the "classics." But even

accepting them as “classics,” we may study the work of Dickens and Mark Twain with the prestige accorded to the literature of Greece and Rome.

For what one may call the mere mechanism of humor, Mark Twain offers a much more available study than Dickens. Indeed if I were to undertake to deliver one of those college courses on “The Technique of Humor” of which mention was made at the opening of this book, I should make much of Mark Twain. A student of a serious mind could learn better from Mark Twain than from any other source how to get rid of it. This is not merely on account of his eminence. Charles Dickens stands at least as eminent as a humorist, if not higher. But Mark Twain was beyond anybody in the world a technical humorist. He combined the basis of the matter—the inspiration—with the mechanism of it. He brings into play, far more than Dickens, the resources of technique, the surprise of words, the shifting dexterity of form. Hence it comes that Mark Twain can be quoted in single sentences, Dickens mostly only in pages. Dickens, both for humor and pathos, must move along on a full flood tide of words. Mark Twain can make a splash even in a puddle. One could put together a joke book of humorous extracts out of Mark Twain. It would be quite hard to do it out of Dickens. The funniest things in Dickens are all part of something else. Much in Mark Twain can stand alone.

Thus, from Mark Twain:

Here we washed in the . . . a (previously) limpid stream.

(Roughing It.)

They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchy: foreigners always spell better than they pronounce.

(Innocents Abroad.)

The guide told us these things and he would hardly try so hazardous an experiment as telling a falsehood when it is all he can do to speak the truth in English without getting lockjaw.

(Innocents Abroad.)

When we see a monk sitting on a rock with a human skull beside him but without other baggage we know that that is St. Jerome.

(Innocents Abroad.)

But if we were to put together some of the “funniest” things most often quoted and remembered from Dickens, we should find that the quotation is insufficient

unless we remember the context.

Take an example from the *Pickwick Papers*:

“Take off his skates!” said Mr. Pickwick. We roar with laughter as we recall it; but, unless we recall it, unless we remember the scene of Mr. Winkle on the ice, it cannot reach us.

“Barkis is willin’!” we quote, and we recall with amusement the courtship of David Copperfield’s Peggotty.

Indeed Dickens can only be quoted in extracts or in little scenes, such as the following in which Mr. Pickwick undertakes to tell the pettifogging lawyers, Dodson and Fogg, what he thought of them:

“And before I go, gentlemen,” said the excited Mr. Pickwick, turning round on the landing, “permit me to say, that of all the disgraceful and rascally proceedings—”

“Stay, sir, stay,” interposed Dodson, with great politeness. “Mr. Jackson! Mr. Wicks!”

“Sir,” said the two clerks, appearing at the bottom of the stairs.

“I merely want you to hear what this gentleman says,” replied Dodson. “Pray, go on, sir—disgraceful and rascally proceedings, I think you said?”

“I did,” said Mr. Pickwick, thoroughly roused. “I said, sir, that of all the disgraceful and rascally proceedings that ever were attempted, this is the most so. I repeat it, sir.”

“You hear that, Mr. Wicks?” said Dodson.

“You won’t forget these expressions, Mr. Jackson?” said Fogg.

“Perhaps you would like to call us swindlers, sir,” said Dodson. “Pray do, sir, if you feel disposed; now pray do, sir.”

“I do,” said Mr. Pickwick. “You *are* swindlers.”

But this peculiar difference in the matter of surface quotation is only one of the many features in which the work of Dickens and the work of Mark Twain are quite separate. Indeed, they come together only at the apex, at the highest reach of their power, in that “divine retrospect” upon life which is the culmination of humor.

The reason for this singular dissimilarity is that the lives of Charles Dickens and Mark Twain lay far apart and never came together, save for one brief contact. They

never knew each other. Only once there was a fleeting intersection of their lives as of “ships that pass in the night.” Young Sam Clemens had just returned in triumph as an Innocent from Abroad, whose travel papers on Europe had been read all over America. He went to hear Dickens lecture, or “read,” in New York, December 23, 1867; but there is no record that he made the acquaintance of Dickens, who at that time was too worn, too broken, too self-absorbed to care to meet anybody. Sam Clemens also was too absorbed that evening in the little girl at his side, Olivia Langdon—this was their first evening together—to care about Dickens or anything else. There is no record, and no internal evidence, to show that either was influenced by the work of the other. In the case of Dickens this was hardly possible. It is true that the *Innocents Abroad* was very widely read in England for a year or so before his death in June, 1870. But for Dickens, buried in *Edwin Drood* and exhausted to the verge of the paralytic stroke that killed him, most likely the book passed unheeded. Nor did Dickens, apart from his wide general influence, at second and third and twentieth hand, help to influence or to form Mark Twain. The columns of Mark Twain’s letters bear no mention of his name, nor does his autobiography mention it, nor the detailed authoritative story of his life written for him by his admirable biographer, Mr. Paine.

The fact is that the basis of Mark Twain’s work was utterly different from that of Dickens. He found it in the contrast of an old civilization with a new. It was the Far West of Nevada and the Rockies and California that inspired Mark Twain. He was able to look back from the altitude of Virginia City and see the older world as it was; presently he went off to Europe on the *Quaker City*, and the trip and the point of view which it gave him inspired all his later work. He was able to turn on Europe—on its forms and ceremonies, its monuments and its mummies (dead and living), its hauteur and its humbug—the “eye of innocence” of the Westerner. And to this eye, contrasts and incongruities are revealed never suspected before. Hence the kings and the mummies and the knights and the medieval pictures and such become “funny.” The previous ideas of the significance of such things are dissolved in the prism of this mode of thought and break into their contrasting and incongruous elements. A knight in armor becomes a man in hardware, a monk pictured in a stained glass window with uplifted eyes is “trying to think of a word.” The killing of Julius Cæsar is “localized”—as done in Nevada journalism. The form of it all is irreverent, but the effect as wholesome as the sweeping of a fresh wind through a dank swamp. This is the true “American” humor.

There is nothing of this in Dickens except perhaps when he applies the cheery ignorance of a British cockney to the interpretation of France and Italy. In his *Pen*

Pictures and in his odd sketches of his life in France, he finds the French a “funny” people, with a most amusing language, and a most laughable politeness and a way of calling foreign gentlemen “monsieur” which is quite ridiculous. But there is no depth in Dickens’s picture. He is not “interpreting” Europe as Mark Twain is. Mark Twain, as the Yankee at the Court of King Arthur, is profound in the satire—right or wrong—of his observation. Dickens as the Cockney at the Court of Versailles is just sniggering—as a cockney would.

The broad basis of the humorous writing of Dickens is that of *character*. When the *Pickwick Papers* were first planned the fun in them was to be that of incident. A group of abstractions called Cockney Sportsmen were to have various misadventures while attempting to ride balky horses, to shoot rooks to the great danger of “beaters” and spectators, to get mixed up with the charging ranks of a sham fight and such things as that. As a matter of fact this kind of stuff was wearing pretty thin already before Dickens ever began to write.

But Dickens, by the instinct of the artist, changed the theme. “I thought,” he said “of Mr. Pickwick.” That means that there flashed upon his mind the conception not of incidents but of a character. Mr. Pickwick, once created, led to the creation of others, of Alfred Jingle, old Mr. Wardle, and, triumphantly, of Sam Weller. The *Pickwick Papers*, opening as mere incident, almost missed the mark of public interest—with a circulation of only 400 copies—but rose as the humor of character replaced the initial idea to the most phenomenal success ever known in the world of letters. Dickens had come into his own. Henceforth, for years, the characters were created as from a magician’s hand; what they did was nothing, what they *were* was everything. So came into the world the Bumbles and the Micawbers and the Gamps, the glorious company still undimmed by time.

What is a humorous, a “funny” character, and how can it be analyzed? All are aware, in actual life, of queer people, funny people, from the pathetic queerness of the halfwit—funny only to children—to the higher range of funny old gentlemen, odd cranks, queer professors. To analyze is often to destroy. A biologist knows too much about a flower. A zoölogist has no illusions about a skylark. A physicist sees nothing in a rainbow. And so perhaps a “funny character” broken apart and analyzed is like a broken toy; it won’t go together again. If the study of humor is ever taken seriously, we must handle it carefully, lest it work its own undoing.

“Funny” characters are made so by presenting, whether we are conscious of it

or not, the same destructive contrasts and incongruities that are the basis of humor itself. Here is Mr. Pickwick—with all the dignity and decorum of affluent middle age as contrasted with its physical limitations; with a highly scientific desire for information contrasted with an utter inability to measure its truth; with a chivalrous and unwearied courtesy which makes him an easy mark—expecting truth and finding deception; seeing the world through roseate spectacles which presently turn a bad world rosy. Mr. Pickwick walks through life conveying with him the contrast between life as it might be and life as it is.

Such are the characters of Dickens. Here is Mr. Micawber with the brisk decisiveness of competence, the manners of the firm reliable man of business concealing the utter incompetence within. Here is Mrs. Gamp combining the tenderest and most sacred functions of human life—the care of maternity, the vigil of the dead—with a complete indifference to their meaning. What a horror she could have been as drawn by another hand! But Dickens suffused her in a soft atmosphere of gin, and saved her.

Dickens thus chiefly depicts and depends upon the humor of character. Even when he is satirizing institutions, it is always done through the medium of characters—real characters, not abstractions or impossibilities like so many of Mark Twain's, but real ones. Thus the denunciation of indiscriminate foreign charities conducted by people who neglect their duties at home is effected through the humor of Mrs. Jellaby (*Bleak House*) sitting in her untidy house and writing reams of letters about the natives of Borrio-boola-Gha, while neglected children fall up and down stairs. The denunciation of the Court of Chancery in the same book is more direct, with less of humor and more of pathos and stern tragedy, but it carries with it the humor, if one can find it so, of the little crackbrained Miss Flyte, and of the ghastly Mr. Vholes. Similarly in *Oliver Twist* the satire on the poor law and the work house is effected through the character of Mr. Bumble. This, on analysis, turns on the grim contrast between the pious care of orphan children and Mr. Bumble's operations carried on under that name. To decry and expose the brutality of the Yorkshire schools, Dickens creates the hideous but half comic character of Mr. Squeers. The contrast lies between the kindly labor of the schoolmaster and Mr. Squeers's method. "W-i-n-d-e-r-s, winders," says Squeers, "go and clean them," and he emphasizes his instructions with a crack of the cane. The treatment of the wretched little boys by Mr. and Mrs. Squeers is a similar hideous incongruity as set beside parental care.

All through Dickens's monumental work, the method of humor is the same. At

times it is replaced by that of pathos, as in the imprisonment of Mr. Dorrit in the Marshalsea, which is poignant in its distress. Compare the similar confinement of Mr. Pickwick (both of them for debt) in the Fleet. Here the social purpose is the same, but the means adopted is humor, not pathos.

I—MR. PICKWICK IN THE FLEET

“Oh,” replied Mr. Pickwick, looking down a dark and filthy staircase, which appeared to lead to a range of damp and gloomy stone vaults, beneath the ground, “and those, I suppose, are the little cellars where the prisoners keep their small quantities of coals. Unpleasant places to have to go down to, but very convenient, I dare say.”

“Yes, I shouldn’t wonder if they was convenient,” replied the gentlemen [Mr. Tom Roker, the turnkey], “seeing that a few people live there, pretty snug.”

“Live! Live down there!” exclaimed Mr. Pickwick.

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“There,” said Mr. Roker [holding open the door of the uninviting room in which he proposed to lodge Mr. Pickwick during his stay in the prison], looking triumphantly round at Mr. Pickwick, “there’s a room!”

Mr. Pickwick’s face, however, betokened such a trifling portion of satisfaction at the appearance of his lodging, that Mr. Roker looked for a reciprocity of feeling into the countenance of Samuel Weller, who, until now, had observed a dignified silence.

“There’s a room, young man,” observed Mr. Roker.

“I see it,” replied Sam, with a placid nod of the head.

“You wouldn’t think to find such a room as this in the Farringdon Hotel, would you?” said Mr. Roker, with a complacent smile.

To this Mr. Weller replied with an easy and unstudied closing of one eye.

II—MR. DORRIT IN THE MARSHALSEA (*Extracts from Charles Dickens’s Little Dorrit*)

There had been taken to the Marshalsea, long before, a debtor with whom this narrative has some concern. He was at that time a very amiable and very helpless middle-aged gentleman, who was going out again directly, because the Marshalsea lock never turned upon a debtor who

was not. . . . He was a shy, retiring man . . . with fingers which wandered to his trembling lip a hundred times during the first half hour of his acquaintance with the jail. His principal anxiety was about his wife.

And with that follows the pathetic chronicle of Edward Dorrit—the Marshalsea prison, the “home” of his wife and children (as it had been for the child Charles Dickens); the birth of his youngest daughter in the prison; the death of his wife; and the long years, a quarter century, of his incarceration. After that, his liberation, rich, in old age, his temporary and pathetic magnificence and his collapse, his dying intelligence wandering back to the scenes of his imprisonment.

Thus for ten days after he was stricken Little Dorrit bent over the pillow, laying her cheek against his. Sometimes she was so worn out that for a few minutes they would slumber together; then she would awake, to recollect, with fast flowing silent tears, what it was that touched her face, and to see, stealing over the cherished face upon the pillow, a deeper shadow than the shadow of the Marshalsea Wall.

Quietly, quietly, all the lines of the plan of the great castle melted, one after the other. Quietly, quietly the ruled and cross-ruled countenance on which they were traced became fair and blank. Quietly, quietly the reflected marks of the prison bars and of the zig-zag iron on the wall-top, faded away. Quietly, quietly the face subsided into a far younger likeness of her own than she had ever seen under the grey hair, and sank to rest.

There can be no doubt of the effectiveness and the wonder of Dickens’s work thus done. He did as much as, or more than, all the Benthams and the Romillys and the Shaftesburys to sweep away the removable hardships, the cruelties and injustices of the England of his day. He led where legislation followed. The pen was mightier than the parliament. Others since Dickens have used the bitter denunciation of fiction to reform social evils, to clear up “the jungle” and cut asunder the “octopus.” But he did it with the laughter and the smiles that mingled even with anger as April sunshine glimmers through the rain. No one ever equaled, no one ever approached, Charles Dickens in this aspect.

Mark Twain, too, sought as a part of his work to uplift the world with laughter. But his mechanism and technique (if one can use such hard words of what is really intuition and instinct) were entirely indifferent. If Mark Twain had wished to blast the Court of Chancery out of existence he would have gone at it in an entirely different

way. He would have imagined some vast fantastic and impossible theme connected with the Court of Chancery. Something like this perhaps: It is found from certain documents that an American millionaire has left all his land under the English Court of Chancery and that his land rightly appraised includes all of the State of Nevada. Hence the whole of Nevada falls under the rule of the Court of Chancery. The miners become, as did many little children in the old days, “wards in Chancery.” A group of Chancery officials in wigs and gowns come out to preside over Carson City and Dead Horse Gulch. The contrast afforded by their dignity, their delays and their formality when set against the life of a mining camp would form the basis of the humor. But the characters, with Mark Twain, would not be real people like the Tulkingshorns and the Jarndyces and the Carstones of *Bleak House*; they’d just be a set of stock abstractions with their legal attributes only—just as the Knights of the *Connecticut Yankee* are “knights” and nothing else.

For it is in that book—the *Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*—that Mark Twain shows this method at its best. All his readers know the story. Many of them consider it his “funniest,” if not his best, work. But most of them, if not all, realize that it is meant to be something far more than a “funny” book; that it is as intense in its denunciation of aristocracy, privilege and inequality among mankind as Dickens’s book is intense in its social purpose.

The Yankee, who, by an easy literary device, finds himself thrown backward in time to the year 528 A. D., is meant to typify the spirit of modern American freedom, with a special knowledge of all things mechanical that stands for progress. In other words, although Mark Twain doesn’t know it, he is meant to be Mark Twain. Through him are thrown into a high light the cruelty and injustice of the past age into which he is projected; through him is shown the way in which the application of scientific knowledge and freedom and equality can enlighten and reform it. More than this—the injustice of this past age, as seen and recorded by the Yankee, and the dullness and indifference which permits it to exist, are not, for Mark Twain, things that have passed away. He sees them still in modern England, and it is modern England as well as the past which he is denouncing. To him every English “Lord” in a London drawing room is as unjust an institution as a Lord of a thousand years ago who threw his varlets into dungeons; an aristocracy is just a band of slaveholders; and a privileged church (meaning the present Church of England) is a sin against the light.

There is no need to discuss here the truth or falsehood of the *Connecticut Yankee* as history and as political thought. It is discussed only in connection with the technique of humor. Naturally its shortcomings are quite obvious. Mark Twain knew

nothing of the lights and shadows of history. He drew from it only sudden fierce angers against the strong and poignant sympathies with the weak. He lumped together everything from the mythical Court of King Arthur to the Court of Louis the Sixteenth, combining all Europe and fifteen hundred years of history into what was called in a lump the Middle Ages. Against this was to be contrasted a highly imaginary place called America from which were conveniently omitted all the thugs, bandits, lynchers and slave owners, all the crooks, grafters, land grabbers, trust barons and railroad magnates, all the delays and complications of the law which hatched out criminals faster than did the tyrannies of Europe. Oddly enough those of us in America who read the book when it came out took it pretty much at Mark Twain's own valuation. The idea of an evil past and an enlightened present, the idea that machinery and progress were synonymous and that democracy cured all evils, was still a mass idea of the time on this continent. The tradition of a "land of liberty" died hard; or better, is not yet dead.

In England, of course, the book gave great offense and called forth recrimination and contempt. The English critics, who had "discovered" Mark Twain as a literary man while Boston still thought him a Western "cut-up," now felt that they had hatched a bad egg. But the effect of a stone thrown into a literary circle is small; it soon fades out as it spreads in the general pond. The English people soon forgave Mark Twain just as the Americans had forgiven Dickens. A humorist, if a great one, is a privileged person; even a small one has a fool's license; the cap and bells turns him into a sacred idiot.

In any case Dickens didn't understand America and Mark Twain didn't understand England. It is amazing how restricted was the outlook of each. Dickens saw only London and saw everything from London; Mark Twain looked at the world all his life from the Mississippi, and the mountains. Dickens in his "palace" at Genoa wrote busily of London, the bells of the Italian churches waking on his ear only the "chimes" of his own city. He walked the streets of Paris with the narrative of Paul Dombey's death still running in his mind, the tears upon his face, unconscious of his whereabouts. To him a revolution in Geneva was just a noise outside the window, and the Crimean War only a show in the winter streets of Paris.

So with Mark Twain. From the golden days of the Nevada camps he looked out on Europe and condemned it, his judgments formed for life. A few fierce elemental ideas about God and Kings and the Past was all he needed. Even the Eastern States of America could never claim him; he lived in Buffalo and never saw it. American history began for him with the Mississippi steamboat.

We have to remember that such a book as the *Connecticut Yankee* is not to be classed as burlesque in the limited sense of pure verbal fun-making. Yet it is an enormously funny book. The remembered pictures of such things as King Arthur's Knights lined up for baseball are unsurpassed. The idea of "Sir Galahad on second base" is about as sharp and complete an incongruity as can be imagined. But behind it all is significance, at least in intention. That is what separates it from pure burlesque.

In this latter—pure, verbal burlesque—both Dickens and Mark Twain had great aptitude when they cared to use it. One interesting example exists, in which they both set down the same thing—namely in each case an imaginary biographical history of a family. Dickens in his opening chapter of *Martin Chuzzlewit*, quite unconnected with the book, records the family history of the Chuzzlewits. Mark Twain, as a newspaper "piece," once wrote a similar biography of the Twains. One may with profit set some extracts side by side.

Dickens writes:

It has been rumored, and it is needless to say the rumor originated in the same base quarters, that a certain male Chuzzlewit, whose birth must be admitted to be involved in some obscurity, was of very mean and low descent. How stands the proof? When the son of that individual, to whom the secret of his father's birth was supposed to have been communicated by his father in his lifetime, lay upon his deathbed, this question was put to him in a distinct, solemn and formal way: "Toby Chuzzlewit, who was your grandfather?" To which he, with his last breath, no less distinctly, solemnly, and formally replied—and his words were taken down at the time, and signed by six witnesses each with his name and address in full—"The Lord No Zoo." It may be said—it *has* been said, for human wickedness has no limits—that there is no lord of that name, and that, among the titles which have become extinct, none at all resembling this, in sound even, is to be discovered. But what is the irresistible inference? Rejecting a theory broached by some well-meaning but mistaken persons, that this Mr. Toby Chuzzlewit's grandfather, to judge from his name, must surely have been a mandarin (which is wholly insupportable, for there is no pretense of his grandmother ever having been out of this country, or of any mandarin having been in it within some years of his father's birth, except those in the tea-shops, which cannot for a moment be regarded as having any bearing on the question, one way or other), rejecting this

hypothesis, is it not manifest that Mr. Toby Chuzzlewit had either received the name imperfectly from his father, or that he had forgotten it, or that he had mispronounced it? and that even at the recent period in question, the Chuzzlewits were connected by a bend sinister, or kind of heraldic over-the-left, with some unknown noble and illustrious house?

Mark Twain writes:

Some years later we have the illustrious John Morgan Twain. He came over to this country with Columbus in 1492 as a passenger. He appears to have been of a crusty, uncomfortable disposition. He complained of the food all the way over, and was always threatening to go ashore unless there was a change. He wanted fresh shad. Hardly a day passed over his head that he did not go idling about the ship with his nose in the air, sneering about the commander, and saying he did not believe Columbus knew where he was going to or had ever been there before. The memorable cry of "Land ho!" thrilled every heart in the ship but his. He gazed awhile through a piece of smoked glass at the penciled line lying on the distant water, and then said: "Land be hanged—it's a raft!"

When this questionable passenger came on board the ship, he brought nothing with him but an old newspaper containing a handkerchief marked "B. G.," one cotton sock marked "L. W. C.," one woolen one marked "D. F.," and a nightshirt marked "O. M. R." And yet during the voyage he worried more about his "trunk," and gave himself more airs about it, than all the rest of the passengers put together.

It will be noted that Mark Twain makes fun of his own family; Dickens makes fun of someone else's. This corresponds to a very important difference in their methods. It was a broad distinguishing characteristic of Mark Twain's work, especially his earlier writing, this method of humor obtained by making fun of oneself, of making oneself the subject of humiliations, of blunders, of bashfulness. Let me offer an example or two of what is meant, in order the better to talk about it.

In the book called *Roughing It* (Vol. I, Chap. X) there is an account of how the writer, in traveling by overland stage across the plains, finds himself served at table at one of the overland stopping places by Slade, the notorious bandit and murderer of the West, as yet unchanged. Mark Twain writes:

The coffee ran out. At least it was reduced to one tin cupful, and Slade was about to take it when he saw that my cup was empty. He politely offered to fill it, but, although I wanted it, I politely declined. I was afraid he had not killed anybody that morning and might be needing diversion. But still with firm politeness he insisted on filling my cup and said I had traveled all night and better deserved it than he—and while he talked he placidly poured the fluid to the last drop. I thanked him and drank it, but it gave me no comfort, for I could not feel sure that he would not be sorry presently, that he had given it away, and proceed to kill me to distract his thoughts from the loss.

The final wording *proceed to kill me to distract his thoughts*, in point of verbal technique draws on the humor contrast and incongruity between the magnitude of the act (murder) and the mildness of the purpose (distraction). But the basic humor of the passage is in the humiliation of self. Compare in the same book the author's account of trying to ride a bucking "Mexican plug" which he was swindled into buying. Or compare at length the famous passage in which Mark Twain and his friends of the journey, caught in a mountain snowstorm, lie down exhausted in the snow to die, and wake up to find the storm over and themselves lying about thirty feet from a hotel. "Brothers, let us die together," said one of the group as they lay down.

This humor of personal discomfiture, written in the first person, is one of the things that absolutely distinguishes the work of Mark Twain from that of Charles Dickens. The humor of Dickens often depends, especially in the earlier books, on discomfiture—the discomfiture of Mr. Minns and of the Tuggses (at Ramsgate) and of other characters in the *Sketches by Boz*; the humiliation of Mr. Winkle in the *Pickwick Papers* when he can't ride and can't shoot and tumbles down on skates. But the humor never turns on the discomfiture of Charles Dickens, either real or imagined. This humor of reversed egotism—the humiliation of oneself, the holding of oneself up to laughter—is much more of an American feature than a British. It may connect perhaps with what used to be the "inferiority complex" of people on this continent as compared with the older world. Or again it may not.

Even in the matter of verbal presentation each of the two great writers has his own especial form and mold of thought. From the cheaper verbal effects both Dickens and Mark Twain were relatively free, especially Mark Twain. Dickens plays

on words in their double senses, but not often in the mere guise of a pun. But Dickens, like Mark Twain, could get better and more subtle humor out of verbal forms than mere pun-making. Compare the famous Dingley Dell cricket match in *Pickwick*, where one of the players, a stout gentleman in cricket costume, is said to “look like half a roll of flannel,” and another cricketer to look “like the other half of the roll.” The smack of the surprise in this is unforgettable. The thing is sometimes done by a direct visual likeness, sometimes by more subtle likeness of thought. Thus with Dickens two old church sextons talk of the death of this person and of that, “as if they themselves were notoriously immortal.”

The characteristic technique of Dickens, however, is the presentation of queer comparisons. This at its best is admirable technique. Bill Nye once spoke of a bow-legged man as having “legs like twenty-five minutes after six.” The utter incongruity of the relationship between time and legs, thus brought into harmony, is fit to rank with scientific discovery. Now, Dickens had an extraordinary gift for seeing likenesses between everything and everything else, especially between animate and inanimate objects. For him, clocks wink, jugs grin, clothes dance and whisper on the clothesline, talking to the wind. Often he has line upon line and paragraph upon paragraph of these sustained comparisons. Here, for example, is young Dickens arriving in Boston:

When I got into the streets upon this Sunday morning, the air was so clear, the houses were so bright and gay, the signboards were painted in such gaudy colours, the gilded letters were so very golden, the bricks were so very red, the stone was so very white, the blinds and area railings were so very green, the knobs and plates upon the street-doors so marvellously bright and twinkling, and all so slight and un-substantial in appearance, that every thoroughfare in the city looked exactly like a scene in a pantomime. . . . As I walked along, I kept glancing up at these boards, confidently expecting to see a few of them change into something; and I never turned a corner suddenly without looking out for the clown and pantaloon, who, I had no doubt, were hiding in a doorway or behind some pillar close at hand. As to Harlequin and Columbine, I discovered immediately that they lodged (they are always looking after lodgings in a pantomime) at a very small clockmaker’s, one story high, near the hotel; which, in addition to various symbols and devices, almost covering the whole front, had a great dial hanging out—to be jumped through, of course.

Mark Twain, too, had his own particular verbal forms and verbal effects, and admirable indeed they were. He kicked loose, after his earliest crude attempt at writing, from the supposed humor of bad spelling. Henceforth he used bad spelling only as a transcription for the bad language in the mouth of his characters. If he wrote "Yessiree!" it was because he meant "Yessiree." Nor did puns make any particular hit out West, or with Mark Twain. But he found and created delight in the misuse of words, not by himself but by his characters, where a sound seems to convey the right meaning but doesn't. Witness the case, as already quoted, of old Mr. Ballou of *Roughing It*, who said that the horses were "bituminous from long deprivation," and who drank half a cup of coffee made with alkaline water and then threw the rest away, saying that it was "too technical for him."

Take as a further example the solemn reconstruction of Shakespeare by the Duke on the raft (in *Huckleberry Finn*) when the Duke is preparing Hamlet's soliloquy to be given by him as a recitation in a Mississippi village. What he makes is not a parody; that is not the point. The contrast lies as between reconstruction from memory and inspired composition:

To be or not to be: that is the bare bodkin.

But Mark Twain's technique of words, his power over words, went much further than this. He had an extraordinary perception of the uses which words ought to have, by analogy with their ordinary use. He thus *extends* them into a new application. We have already cited the case where he speaks of a little town in the West where the people were very religious and where "each one of the Protestant sects had a *plant* of its own!" In using the word he makes an ingenious implication as to the mundane aspect of spiritual life. Plant? That would lead on to the "general manager" for the pastor, and "salesmen" for the sidesmen.

But neither the humor of Dickens nor that of Mark Twain would have attained to the eminence which it holds and deserves if it did not contain far higher elements than these. There is, as has been said, a still higher plane to which humor can attain. This is seen when the contrasts and incongruities and misfits upon which humor rests are those of life itself—the contrast between what we might be and what we are, between the petty cares and anxieties of today and the nothingness to which they fade tomorrow, between the fever and the fret of life and the final calm of death.

In retrospect all our little activities are but as nothing, all that we do has in it a touch of the pathetic, and even our sins and wickedness and crime are easily pardoned in the realization of their futility. Thus do we look back in life to the angers and the troubles of childhood. Thus might omniscient wisdom look on the fates and

folly of mankind. In this divine retrospect humor and pathos become one, and the eyes of laughter brim with tears. The highest point of Dickens's art is reached when he presents to us a crook like Alfred Jingle, and makes him almost lovable, a villain like Squeers and extracts amusement from him, a horror like Mrs. Gamp and calls forth laughter. This "divine retrospect" was the real marvel of Dickens's genius. No one ever achieved it as he did. That is why his books rise before the mind even larger in remembrance than in perusal. This soft light of retrospect that looks back on the sins and sorrows of life, as we do on the angers of childhood, with the same understanding and forgiveness, this is humor at its greatest.

Mark Twain, too, reaches it—preëminently with Huckleberry Finn and Nigger Jim. The little outcast boy, floating down the broad flood of the Mississippi on his raft, the clarity of his unsullied soul—and with him Nigger Jim, who embodies the docility, the forgivingness of the Negro race—these are wonderful characters, and this is a searching indictment of our civilization. But the soft haze in which it lies, the very shadows on the waters, rob it of all anger. Huckleberry Finn could have stepped across into the pages of Dickens to talk with Alfred Jingle in the debtors' prison; or could have carried Jingle away on his raft to join with the Duke and the King in re-editing Shakespeare. For at this point the art of the two writers has run into one. Thinking of such work as this, one wonders whether, in our age of flickering shadows and raucous voices, it can ever be done again. Perhaps the time is past.

CHAPTER V COMIC AND SUPER-COMIC VERSE

Comic and Super-Comic Distinguished—Poetry and Humor-Satirical Verse—
Comic Verbal Effects—Comic Narrative—The Mock Heroic—The Super-
Comic School.

Example of Comic Verse

When Grandmamma fell off the boat
And couldn't swim, and wouldn't float,
 And Young Matilda sat and smiled,
 I almost could have slapped the child.
Captain Harry Graham, in Ruthless Rhymes.

Example of Super-Comic Verse

Have you heard of the dreadful fate
Of Mr. P. P. Bliss and wife?
Of their death I will relate,
And also others lost their life;
Ashtabula Bridge disaster,
Where so many people died
Without a thought that destruction
Would plunge them 'neath the wheel of tide.
The Sweet Singer of Michigan (1878).

Example of Unconscious Super-Comic Verse

I met a little cottage girl,
She was eight years old,—*she said!*
Mr. William Wordsworth.

Comic verse means verse that is written with the intention and with the effect of making it funny. Super-comic verse is written without the same intention but with the same effect. In the one case we laugh with the writer; in the other we laugh at him.

Captain Harry Graham's *Ruthless Rhyme*, as quoted above, in which he describes the distressing death of Grandmamma, when she fell off a fishing-punt is comic verse. But the poem by Mrs. Julia Moore, the "Sweet Singer of Michigan," recording the death of "Mr. P. P. Bliss and wife" in the Ashtabula disaster of 1874, is

super-comic. The first kind of verse may be written, after a fashion, by any literary person with a sense of humor. But super-comic verse demands a peculiar combination of inspiration and ignorance, difficult to find.

James McIntyre would hardly have written his reflections on the production of the Mammoth Cheese at Ingersoll, Ontario, in 1888, without being inspired to see in the cheese a vision of the coming greatness of Canada. Nor could he, with an academic education, have retained the peculiar use of language in which he gave it expression. Such poets as Gray of the *Elegy*, Byron and Shelley, masters of language, if they had not been educated would have become super-comic poets. Thus, compare Gray's thought:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,

with that of the poet Mytheryll, of Georgina Township, Ontario, who writes of a funeral at the Lake Shore Church:

The bell is tolling at the door;
It seems to say, "Here comes one more."

Gray's expression is more sustained, perhaps more graceful; but that of Mytheryll is more direct. He seizes the central thought and states it.

Or compare, to take a further illustration more or less at random, two rival interpretations in verse of motion and transportation.

Here we have, on the one hand, Lord Byron:

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean, roll,
Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain.

But put beside this the well-known poem on the Canadian Pacific Railway, attributed, though I think incorrectly, to Harry Barker of the Operating Staff of the Arts Building of McGill University.

Again we mount our flying car
And o'er the prairies fly afar;
Nothing can now our progress bar
For mountains don't stop the C. P. R.

One admits the quality of Byron's verse. Yet Barker's—if it is Barker's—moves faster. One has a feeling, after comparing the two, that the C. P. R. would beat out Byron's fleet with ease. The speed is heightened by the artful repetition in Barker's

verse of the word “fly,” a characteristic device of the super-comic poet who realizes that saying a thing twice is twice as effective as saying it once. Compare all primitive and juvenile verse, such as “Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son,” or, “Half a league, half a league, half a league onward”—equal to a league and a half in all.

But to return a moment to the two poems quoted as expressions of motion, one observes that McIntyre of Ingersoll fuses both thoughts into one by grasping the idea that the C. P. R. carries tea from China.

Canadian flags are now unfurled
In the ports of the Chinese.
A short route to the Oriental world
Gives Canada her fine, cheap teas.

Round this whole question of comic and super-comic verse and the relation of the poetic form to the expression of humor, there is a vast deal to say. Let us begin at the beginning.

Poetry at its best is the noblest instrument of human expression. It outranks prose. It conveys our emotions and the sights and sounds that inspire them with far greater power. Thus you may say in prose, “The Falls of Niagara over which a great many million gallons of water fall 160 feet to form a very impressive spectacle.” But you have not *made* it so. You have said it, but it doesn’t “get over.” It remains for the poet to find such words and images in which to convey his impression that you may seem to see and hear the rush and roar of the cataract.

There is no way of conveying in prose such things as:

Tears idle tears,
I know not what they mean,
Tears from the depth of some divine despair,
.

In looking at the happy Autumn fields
And thinking on the days that are no more.

But in the world of humor, poetry plays a very subordinate part. Its range is very limited. Practically all the great masterpieces of humor are written in prose. The effects to be obtained from poetry lie rather in the domain of the “comic” than of the larger humor; they are for the most part the mere cracklings of verbal wit, water running over pebbles in the sunlight, not the deep moving current of humorous thought.

The highest range of comic verse—highest, that is, in point of dignity, not by any means in point of comicality—is where poetry is used as humorous satire, the effective power of the words being something like the effective power of serious poetry as just described.

Consider this case: Some years ago a bill was introduced in the British Parliament, for disestablishing the Welsh church. The importance of the subject to the world at large, outside of England, was about on a par with the importance of a dog show at Aberystwith. In fact the world at large didn't know there was a Welsh church, and had no idea what disestablishing it would do to it.

Yet Mr. F. E. Smith—later Lord Birkenhead—speaking against the bill in the House of Commons, declared that “this bill, has shocked the conscience of every Christian community in Europe.” The absurd contrast between the width of the statement and the narrowness of the subject affords at once an opportunity for denunciation.

Now observe the different ways in which the denunciation may be done. First: a member of the opposite side of the house might say:

“Does the Hon. gentleman have the presumption to tell us that this purely domestic piece of legislation, entirely within the statutory control of parliament, can possibly be made a subject of controversy or of protest by another nation? If so, I tell him that his presumption is as false as it is unwarranted.”

Or, secondly, consider how a dignified historian, writing of the incident with a full and leisurely pen, would deal with it:

“The exaggerated plea put forward by a leading member of the opposition that legislation affecting little more than the financial arrangements of a minor principality, and in no way involving the interpretation of religious doctrine or disturbing the spiritual life of the nation, could become a subject of world-wide agitation and protest, was so obviously beyond all the facts of the case as at once to afford a target alike for the denunciation of the orator, and for the jeers of the popular press.”

.

But now see how marvelously Mr. G. K. Chesterton dealt with it in a mocking

“comic” poem, calling up a supposed vision of pious Roman Catholics horrified by the bill:

Are they clinging to their crosses,
F. E. Smith,
Where the Breton boat-fleet tosses,
Are they, Smith?
Do they, fasting, tramping, bleeding,
Wait the news from this our city,
Groaning, “That’s the second reading,”
Hissing, “There is still Committee!”
If the voice of Cecil falters,
If McKenna’s point has pith,
Do they tremble for their altars?
Do they, Smith?

Here are two things put into incongruous juxtaposition—first, the Breton fishermen as they would be if overwhelmed with real disaster, such as hurricane and shipwreck that strewed their coast with corpses, and sent the wives and children and the survivors to crowd around their crosses and altars, and second the real attitude of the Breton fishermen toward the Welsh disestablishment bill.

One may imagine an English tourist in Brittany saying to a fisherman:

Que pensez-vous, Mooshoo, de ce bill pour désétablir l’église de Wales?

And the fisherman saying:

Plaît-il? M’sieu, un bill de quoi?

The effect of the verse is heightened by the further happy incongruities of language—the casual, *Are they, Smith?* and the tragic setting: the notion of fishermen whispering and murmuring in awe about “committees” and “second readings.”

It is a beautiful example of humorous satire on its highest plane; purely comic poetry may be funnier, and is certainly kinder, but it could not be more effective.

Now take as standing at the other end of the scale, in class not in quality, the deathless ode written by Mr. W. St. Leger on the Chavender or Chub. This is purely

and simply a matter of words and sounds. It has no discoverable meaning whatever. But it is delightful.

It appears that the fish commonly called a chub used also to be called a chavender. Indeed Izaak Walton in his *Compleat Angler* makes the statement, "Now is the time to fish for Chavender or Chub." The luminous intelligence of Mr. St. Leger at once made clear the fact that if what is called a Chub can also be called a Chavender, that anything ending in -ub can also be called something ending in -avender: and *vice versa*. This discovery was all that was needed, the result was inevitable and appears in the poem entitled:

A False Gallop of Analogies

There is a fine stuffed chavender,
A chavender or chub,
That decks the rural pavender
The pavender or pub,
Wherein I eat my gravender,
My gravender or grub.

How good the honest gravender!
How snug the rustic pavender!
From sheets as sweet as lavender,
As lavender or lub,
I jump into my tavender,
My tavender or tub.

And so on, for twenty-six more lines, which bring out such delightful verbalities as "clavender," wherein a man takes his ease, looking out of window at the "shravenders" which bloom beside it; and an improvement on Hamlet in the fine reflection "Ay, there's the ravender!"

The English, who lean more toward academic humor, perhaps, than we do on our side of the Atlantic, have been especially fortunate in exploiting these verbal forms. For example the ingenious Harry Graham has made the discovery that many of our longer words are so well known and so distinctive that when we have half of them we don't need the rest. We know it already. Why say, "promiscuous" when "promisc" is quite enough? Why call a thing a "phenomenon" when "phenom" will do? When Disraeli called Mr. Gladstone a "sophisticated rhetorician infatuated with the exuberance of his own verbosity," he might just as well have said "a sophist

rhetorish infat with the exube of his own verbos.”

Now observe this discovery set to words and music.

I gladly publish to the pop.
A scheme of which I make no myst.,
And beg my fellow scribes to cop.
This labour-saving syst.
I offer it to the consid.
Of every thoughtful individ.

.

The author working like a beav.,
His readers' pleasure could redoub.
Did he but now and then abbrev.
The work he gives his pub.

.

If playwrights would but thus dimin.
The length of time each drama takes,
(The Second Mrs. Tan. by Pin.
Or even Ham. by Shakes.)
We could maintain a watchful att.
When at a Mat. on Wed. or Sat.

.

Quite different from the verbal comicality of comic verse, or the use of verse as a means of satire, is the form that may be called Narrative Comic Verse. This is intended to be the counterpart of serious narrative verse, once such a popular form of literature. To this latter class belonged the narrative poems of Sir Walter Scott (*Marmion*, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, and so on), and most of the works of Lord Byron. In an age which sees a story told by electricity in one evening and forgets it coming home, the method is too slow.

Comic narrative verse was meant to be the amusing form corresponding to such things as *Marmion*. It was not parody; it was intended as funny narrative on its own account not as a parody of something else. Compare as two examples *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *John Gilpin*.

The way was long, the wind was cold;
The minstrel was infirm and old.
His harp, his sole remaining joy,
Was carried by an orphan boy.
The last of all the bards was he
That sang of Border chivalry.

The parody form of this runs:

The way was long, the wind was cold;
The minstrel was infernal old.
His harp, his sole remaining joy,
Was carried by an awful boy.
The last of all the bards was he,
And, I believe, deservedly.

But now set beside it:

John Gilpin was a citizen
Of credit and renown,
A train-band captain eke was he
Of famous London town.
etc.

Here follow in verse the misadventures of John Gilpin which we remember from our childhood. He decides to take a holiday, a day off, with his wife and his three children and his sister-in-law and her child. They are to drive out to the *Bell* at Islington, dine and return. But as his women folk and children fill the chaise, Gilpin sets out on horseback. His horse runs away, the people shout, the poultry fly, the donkeys bray, he dashes past the *Bell*, gets to goodness-knows-where and at last safe home.

The analysis of the humor shows it to be based on the humor of discomfiture and misadventure—the destructive contrast between doing things properly and bungling them—that was so popular from the days of Goldsmith to those of Dickens. John Gilpin and Mr. Winkle are of the same family. Dickens could have written up the John Gilpin story as a sketch of Boz. Thus:—

Who so sprightly as Master John Gilpin as he stands beside his steed
ready to mount? What so bright as the red coat that he has manfully

thrown about him, and what so gallant as the trusty sword that has known the terrors of the drill field . . . etc. etc.

As with the prose form so with the verse form, the humor is supposed to come more clearly to view from the neat and felicitous phrases that convey it.

I came because your horse would come
And if well forbode,
My hat and wig will soon be here,—
They are upon the road.

Throughout all such narrative verse there is a running contrast between the smoothness and the felicity of the verse, and the triviality of the occurrences recorded. If we carry this a little further we come into the closely related domain of what may be called Mock Heroic Verse. Here there is a sustained contrast between the elevation and dignity of the language and the obvious unimportance or triviality of the subject. Thus in a poem by Mr. E. V. Knox that appeared in *Punch* a few years ago we have a panegyric of fat men, couched in language fitted for the praise of crusaders. Take the verse:

Like a great trout within a darkened pool,
Or like a prize ox fattened for a show,
Calm in adversity, in danger cool,
Turning a bulbous eye on freak or fool,
Such are fat men and I would have them so.

This is marvelous. The language actually imposes on us; there is a majesty and dignity about it that carries conviction. We forget what it is about; we feel that anything so noble must be true. And there is far more “to it” than the mere usual mock-heroic effect by which for example a battle between two grasshoppers is described as a desperate duel, or the love of the lobster portrayed in an agony of sentiment. Mock heroic stuff was done to death and died two generations ago. Nobody reads it now. But this is different. It involves a complete shifting or overturn of usual valuations. Fat is generally comic. A “fat man’s race” is a joke. The “fat boy” in *Pickwick* is a sustained source of merriment. A fat lover is ridiculous. The tears of a fat man are laughable.

Yet here is the fat man suddenly changed from a “suet-man” to a “super-man.” Perhaps he is. And so the humor rests, as all high humor does, on a real basis of thought. It starts us thinking about fat: it is as if a physiological society held a debate

on the question:

“Resolved that any serious increase of adipose tissue militates against the intensity of intellectual and spiritual life.”

It recalls to us Shakespeare’s thought as put into the mouth of Cæsar,

“Let me have men about me that are fat;
Sleek-headed men and such as sleep o’ nights;
Yon’ Cassius hath a lean and hungry look;—
He thinks too much.”

Or we remember Hamlet’s agonized cry:—

“Oh that this too, too solid flesh would melt.”

We begin turning up our encyclopedias to see who was fat. Were the Apostles fat men? How about Alfred the Great? Surely Dante at least was thin! Ah! But Napoleon—he grew fat as he succeeded. Yes, but wasn’t that why he lost Waterloo? And so on.

We turn now, as the professors say, to the very interesting question of the technique of comic verse. In other words, how do you do it, anyway?

Now there is a lot of verse which ordinarily would be called “comic verse,” which belongs in reality under other heads. A good deal of it, for example, is mere *parody*, as already discussed in the preceding chapter.

But even at its best all parody verse has to be marked down as belonging in a low class. Even at its best it is parasitic; it is not first-hand literature.

Another elementary form of comic verse is to make it depend on puns, as discussed in an earlier chapter. Great masses of Tom Hood’s comic verse amounted to nothing more than this.

FAITHLESS SALLY BROWN

Young Ben he was a nice young man,
A carpenter by trade;
And he fell in love with Sally Brown,
That was a lady's maid.

But as they fetch'd a walk one day
They met a press gang crew;
And Sally she did faint away,
Whilst Ben he was brought to.

The boatswain swore with wicked words,
Enough to shock a saint,
That though she did seem in a fit
'Twas nothing but a feint.

"Come girl," he said, "hold up your head,
He'll be as good as me,
For when your swain is in our boat
A boatswain he will be."

(Ben having been taken away to serve in the navy, Sally presently forgot him and took up with another lover. Ben returning home to find himself forgotten in his despair commits suicide.)

His death, which happened in his berth,
At forty odd befell;
They went and told the sexton, and
The sexton toll'd the bell.

The last verse is probably one of the best remembered of Hood's innumerable puns, and the most characteristic of his genius. Any merit or amusement that is in the poem lies purely in the ingenuity of the language. The "story" is nothing. A child could think of it; and meaning it has none.

There are other variants of comic verse technique, on a purely verbal plane not much exploited, which might still exercise the ingenuity of the student. Take this case. A well known poem is often so well known that people know both the end and the beginning and so get a pleasant shock of humorous effect when all of the poem is left

out, except the beginning and the end, and yet it seems to be there: thus:

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward.
Then they rode back, but not,
Not the six hundred.

A similar “degradation effect” can be got by mixing, half and half, two well known poems that happen to have the same meter. Longfellow’s “Village Blacksmith” and his “Slave’s Dream,” have the same form of line and the same rhythm. Put them together and you get:

Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands,
His breast is bare, his matted hair
Is buried in the sands
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

etc. etc.

Another form, always to be connected with the memory of Lewis Carroll of *Alice in Wonderland* is found in the use of words that are not really words—known as such—but arrangements of sounds that seem to imply a certain meaning though apparently not making any sense at all.

It is probable that, as we go on using our native tongue year after year, unconsciously certain sounds become connected with certain kinds of ideas. This is obvious in the case of the straight imitation words, (*onomatopœia* as the scholars call it), such as “splash” and “bang” and “hiss.” But the principle carries much further and made-up words seem to carry a meaning though we cannot tell where it comes from. Proper names as invented in fiction are a good example; there are certain names that seem of necessity to indicate a cheery man, or a taciturn man, or a contemptible man. Charles Dickens had a master hand for such invention. Thus, when he christened the two cheerful old philanthropists in *Nicholas Nickleby*, the Cheerybles the thing is obvious. But take the repulsive, damp, oleaginous, brandy-soaked “nurse” in *Martin Chuzzlewit*—what name so apt as Mrs. Gamp? Or the slimy, ghastly lawyer of *Bleak House* who drained the life out of young Richard Carstone—Mr. Vholes. The name is wonderful! One may say, if he will, that these names are direct combinations of two words—that Vholes is combined of “vampire” and “ghoul”; or that Gamp is “gruesome” and “damp.” It may be so. But it doesn’t

follow, and it doesn't follow that Dickens meant it so. It is more likely our subconscious connection of words and sounds.

Lewis Carroll applied this to comic verse, the supreme example of it being the famous *Jabberwocky*:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

Some of the words no doubt are made by direct telescoping of two known words. "Brillig" may be "brilliant" and "twilight." But a lot of the words are not combinations. They stand by themselves.

When the same technique is carried to an extreme, language is reduced to a series of grunts, groans, pauses and booming reverberations—with here and there a word or two to carry the sense. Anyone who has heard the recitation of "Starlight," the Australian race-horse, winning the cup, will know just what is meant.

But the highest comic range of comic verse—for which indeed the name "comic" seems a little cheap—is found in humorous poems not depending on parody, or pun, or mere verbal eccentricities, but humorous in themselves. Among the best known examples are Bret Harte's "Heathen Chinees" and his "Society upon the Stanislaus," as chronicled by Truthful James; Gilbert and Sullivan's "Etiquette"; and other such masterpieces of human genius. To write such verse demands far more than mere academic knowledge or verbal ingenuity. It is far above the reach of common men.

For the technique of such humorous verse the first requirement is that there must be a humorous story to tell—a basic idea which would be quite funny in plain prose, and which wouldn't quite be killed even by the worse narration. Thus the notion of two well-bred Englishmen being shipwrecked on a desert island, as in "Etiquette," and not being able to speak to one another because *they had never been introduced*, is a funny notion. Analyzed out, it turns on the incongruity of the rigidity of "etiquette" and its utter futility in reality.

This is the basis. The technique of the narration turns on the absolute artlessness of the language; it must be as simple as talking; no strain; no poetic license; every phrase *just as it would be in prose*, so that prose and verse, as it were, turn into one another.

Compare the way in which the castaways of "Etiquette" manage to meet one another:

“I beg your pardon,—pray forgive me if I seem too bold,—
But you have breathed a name I knew familiarly of old,
You spoke aloud of Robinson,—I happened to be by,—
You know him?”—“Yes, extremely well,”—“Allow me, so do I.”

It all runs so neat and pat, as if it were just verse by accident. Compare similarly, in *The Bab Ballads* by the same authors, the famous poem about Captain Reece, commander of the *Mantelpiece* whose kindly treatment of his crew bespoke the new humaneness of the Victorian age. The verse runs utterly without effort, as if the writer were merely trying to state a few facts in the simplest way, and by accident the facts fell into rhyme.

A feather bed had every man,
Warm slippers and hot water can,
Brown windsor from the captain's store,
A valet, too, to every four.

Did they with thirst in summer burn
Lo, seltzogenes at every turn,
And on all very sultry days
Cream ices handed round on trays.

Among the writers of the present day Owen Seaman shows the same command of this particular technique and combines it with a masterly use of other devices. His, for example, is *par excellence* what one may call the academic and scientific technique of comic verse. In this, terms and phrases belonging, let us say, to physics or to plant-physiology, are made to fit into colloquial verse with a peculiarly amusing incongruity.

The bulbous crowfoot drained his dewy cup;
The saxifrage enjoyed a morning crawl
The ampelopsis slowly sidled up
The garden wall.

Certain writers have even carried this form of technique so far as to invade the hermit kingdom of mathematics, as thus:

He was a man well skilled to deal
With indices and surds,
 $X^2 + 27x = 11/3$.

Which is as good as a puzzle to the uninitiated and a wonderful example of verbal comic wit without meaning. Or compare the version of "Lord Ullin's Daughter," in which the devoted Highland boatman dies a death worthy of Euclid or Archimedes:

The angry water gains apace
Both of his sides and half his base,
Till as he sits he seems to lose
The square of his hypotenuse.

.

In such good company one would gladly linger. "*J'en passe et des meilleurs*," as some Frenchman said long ago. One would gladly talk of C. S. Calverley, of Bon Gauthier of the past and of A. P. Herbert, of the American Arthur Guiterman, worthy to rank with any of them in ingenuity. Or imagine writing of comic verse and not mentioning the verses of Charles Graves, one of Mr. *Punch's* most gifted offspring and his chosen historian; or leaving out the death of the Ahkoond of Swat, suddenly reported by cable in 1880, which called forth from George Lanigan the threnody beginning:

What, what, what, what's the news from Swat?

But this book makes no pretension of being an exhaustive repertory, but is merely a voyage of discovery. It is in England more than on our side of the Atlantic that these forms of academic verse have been cultivated. We suffer in this as in so many other instances where art must be sacrificed to commerce and things not published unless they can appeal to all classes, educated or not.

There may be enumerated lastly that very high form of comic poetry in which nothing but the form is light or comic, the underlying meaning being closer to tears than laughter, and partaking thus of the highest elements that make up humor. Here is an example from the book of the brilliant young Canadian, Joe Macdougall (*If You Know What I Mean*), entitled "Nunc Dimittis":

“Gentlemen,”—thus the professor—
“That will be all for to-day.”
Business of shuffling and scuffling,
Putting of notebooks away;
Business of leaving the classroom,
Business of reaching the air,
Business of laughing and shouting,
Finding the out-of-doors fair.

.

Years have gone by; the professor,
Doddering, doting and grey,
Still tells irreverent classes,
“That will be all for to-day.”
Folds his worn notes in his pocket,
Wearily stumbles his way,
Over the dusk dreaming campus,
Counting his miserable pay.

.

Some day an angel will tap him
Soft on the shoulder and say,
“Mr. Scholasticus Thompson,
That will be all for to-day.”

But we may turn from the gathering gloom of Macdougall’s campus to the inviting landscape of super-comic verse.

Super-Comic Poetry is a distinctive product. It does not mean simply the indifferent work of indifferent poets. It is far more than that. No one could write it at will, and it is extremely difficult to imitate. It is the work of people who would undoubtedly have been poets if they had had education and academic background. There is thus something pathetic about the work of the super-comic poet: the intense “will” without the power; the “urge” toward art without the means; the inspiration without the ability.

It suggests Rodin’s statue of The Thinker—the primitive man, his stone head sunk upon his stone hand, buried in thought, trying to “think out something,” dull and conscious of his dullness, but almost fierce in the consciousness of his purpose and his lack of means. Think of something? What? Well, probably, let us say, whether two and two make four? At times he gets a glimpse of it, then it evades him—two

and then two and then another two—let us try again.

So with the super-comic poet. The inspiration, the strenuous wave of thought is all there. But the means! The means! How to say it. Here is a disaster at the Ashtabula. P. P. Bliss is dead! Poor P. P. Bliss! And worse, “P. P. Bliss and wife.” Are there no words? Come let us try! Others have done it. Look at Byron,—how did he say it?

“Man marks the earth with ruin, his control stops at the shore. Upon the water plain the wrecks are all thy deed.”

Can’t we say something like that? Or Gray what does he say about death?

“For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey, this pleasing anxious being e’er resigned, left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,”

—just as a P. P. Bliss did—

“nor cast one longing lingering look behind.”

—as no doubt P. P. Bliss must have. Can’t we get that over. And his wife, surely that’s a beautiful thought, the devotion of the two Blisses. How was it that Lady Nairn expressed it—“*Could you come back to me Douglas, Douglas, in the same old likeness that I knew!*” Ah, that’s the stuff!

And then, through the blind urge of untrained, unguided inspiration emerges the pitiful result: Here is the disaster:—

Swiftly passed the engine call
Hastening souls on to death
Warning not one of them all
It brought despair right and left.

How’s that, Byron?

And here is the devotion of the two Blisses,

P. P. Bliss showed great devotion
To his faithful wife his pride,
When he saw that she must perish
He died a martyr by her side.

How’s that, Lord Tennyson? About right, eh? And now for the reflections on

death. Listen to this, Mr. Swinburne. You rather fancied yourself at this sort of thing, with your “even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea.” You watch where P. P. Bliss wound to:

P. P. Bliss went home alone,
Left all friends, earth and fame,
To rest in God’s holy love:
Left in earth his work by numbers
It is read by great and small
He by it will be remembered
He has left it for us all.

And the most pathetic part of it is that the super-comic poet, having written it, thinks it all wonderful; reads it again and again. This particular writer, the Sweet Singer of Michigan, was so fascinated with her own verse that she felt rather severe toward Lord Byron, as a man who has missed his chances, but might have measured up to herself if he had lived as they do in Michigan. She wrote of him:

The character of Lord Byron
Was of a low degree,
Caused by his reckless conduct
And bad company.
He sprung from an ancient house
Noble but poor in deed.
His career on earth was marred
By his own misdeeds.

.

In the tragedy of P. P. Bliss, as in so much of super-comic verse, the basis of the humor lies in the grim contrast between the terrible reality of the tragedy depicted and the trivial and ill-contrived reality of the language that tells of it.

Thus, after the awful disaster of the *Titanic*, a super-comic poet, with nothing in his heart but sorrow and reverence and a desire to cast upon the waters a wreath in memory of the victims, brought out a poem on the subject, printed and bound by itself. It sold well. So it would. It began:

My! What an awful night they had!
That night that boat went down.

One cannot laugh. It is only when time’s ivy has long since grown over the

sorrow—as it grows over the Ashtabula bridge—that the pity and pathos of the super-comic poetry may pass in laughter.

Similarly it is a distinguishing mark of the super-comic poet that he is bold enough to tackle any theme that has in it an element of grandeur, even if the surrounding circumstances fall short of it. Thus: A young man fell into Toronto Bay and was drowned, (so long ago that he dates and ranks with P. P. Bliss of Ashtabula). His body, recovered months later, was identified only by the trouser buttons on his pants, recognized by a Montreal tailor. The identification helped no doubt to bring peace to his parents. Yet Tennyson or Longfellow would have felt delicate about the pants buttons. Not so the true super-comic poet. He reached out for his lyre.

A young man's body long it lay
In bottom of Toronto Bay,
But out at last the waters bore
And raised him up near the shore.

But no one knew his rank or station
No one knew his home or nation
But his form and dress were genteel
And may so now they did feel.

Kind man took charge of the remains
And was well rewarded for his pains,
So skilful he did him embalm,
Restored the features, sweet and calm. . . .

But that's enough; a prose preface to the poem explains about the penetration of the tailor in Montreal who "fame and honour gained" by recognizing the pants.

The references to Toronto Bay and to Ashtabula remind us that it is above all in newer countries that the super-comic poet emerges and flourishes. There is a reason for this. In an older country the work of the super-comic poet is apt to be, consciously or not, mere imitation. Thus in England if a railway porter writes a poem he probably imitates Tennyson. His poetry is feeble, but it is pitiable rather than ludicrous. He can never reach to the range of the super-comic poet of the new and growing country. Here the artist is carried away by inspiration, not by imitation. He feels the greatness of the country; he sees its future; he glories in its resources. Thus

one Canadian poet sings:

Our lakes abound in luscious fish,
And we can have them if we wish.

Why not! Let's have them by all means. Those who know the anthology of Canadian super-poetry will recall, with a certain affection, this bygone poet of the outgone generation whose greatest source of inspiration was the size and the growing majesty of the Dominion. This to the poet's mind, seemed to focus itself especially into two spots of blinding light, the making of cheese at Ingersoll, Ontario, and the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

No nobler example of this sort of thing is found than in the verses of this bygone James McIntyre, of Ingersoll, Ontario. His work contains so much to admire for its patriotism and its national inspiration that one may quote it over his own name without the unkindness of ridicule. To this fervid and inspired mind the growth of cheese making in Western Ontario from a farm occupation to a factory industry presented a heroic epic. Note the chronicled beginning of the Industry:

When Father Ranney left the States,
In Canada to try the fates,
He settled down in Deerham;
Then no dairyman lived near him.
He was the first there to squeeze
His cows' milk into good cheese,
And at each Provincial show
His famed cheese was all the go.

And the story of its progress in such verses as

A few years since our Oxford farms
Were nearly robbed of all their charms;
But now their owners live at ease,
Rejoicing in their crop of cheese.

Then comes the staggering episode of the making of the Mammoth Cheese at Ingersoll, Ontario (1885 or thereabouts).

To prove the wealth that here abounds
One cheese weighed eight thousand pounds
Had it hung in the air at noon,
Folks would have thought it the moon.

On the top of which comes the astounding news that Mr. Harris—presumably an official authority—is to send the cheese to the French Exposition at Paris. The poet exhorts the cheese:

May you not receive a scar as
We have heard that Mr. Harris
Intends to send you as far as
The great world show at Paris.

Nor is the end yet. The poet, with a vision like that of Tennyson when he “looked into the future far as human eye could see, and saw a vision of the world of glory still to be,” looks into the mists and sees human destiny culminating in the making of a ten ton cheese:

Who hath prophetic vision sees
In future times a ten ton cheese
Several companies could join
To furnish curds for a great combine.

The political effect of the making of this cheese would be incalculable:

So British lands would confederate
Three hundred provinces in one state
When all in harmony agrees
To be pressed in one like this cheese.

But just to put James McIntyre and his fellows into their proper company, let it be observed how closely Wordsworth runs them as a super-poet. Here is the same humorous effect brought about by incongruous use of language too trivial for the setting. Wordsworth used to get this effect without trying to. Compare his well known line:

A Mr. Wilkinson a clergyman

or his gem of expression

A simple tub like one of those
That women use to wash their clothes.

Wordsworth’s theory that poetry must be simple and direct and heart-to-heart betrayed him into writing comic poetry without knowing it.

I put my hat upon my head
And walked into the Strand
And there I met another man
Whose hat was in his hand.

Either Wordsworth wrote that, or someone imitated it from him. It doesn't matter which. It illustrates the point. Students might find it a useful exercise to try to re-set the punctuation in the following drivelng extract from Wordsworth's ode to, or at, a Highland Girl, so as to make it a little less silly than when written.

What joy to hear thee and to see
Thy elder brother. I would be thy
Father Anything to thee.

It is, or should be, a principle of the construction of comic verse that it should not be extended too far without serious "relief."

In the old fashioned melodrama the overwrought feelings of the spectators were relieved by the introduction of the "comic man." A sudden burst of laughter forestalled a burst of tears.

In the examples quoted above the poems are so short as to need no "relief." But longer poems get very wearisome. Our great-grandfathers, who read *Dr. Syntax* and such things, were immune to weariness. It was hard to bore them. They could stand for ten thousand lines, all alike in tone and sentiment. People who read the whole of Pope's *Iliad* in English rhyming couplets could never feel tired again. But the modern reader, depraved by moving pictures and radio, is far more sensitive. Thus even the very best of rhymes—for example Hilaire Belloc's *Modern Traveller*, a perfect marvel of ingenuity and humor—can presently run to a kind of sameness. The Rev. Richard H. Barham, who wrote the *Ingoldsby Legends* (1858), possessed this faculty of changing from gay to grave. See his poem, "The Execution" which describes how My Lord Tomnoddy and his friends, rather bored for something novel, decided to go and see a hanging. As the hour set was early morning, they sat up all night playing cards and playing capers—ended by falling asleep and missing the hanging. Observe the contrasted extracts from the poem. The supper party gathers to consume:

Welsh rabbits and kidneys—rare work for the jaws:—
And very large lobsters, with very large claws;
And there is McFuze, And Lieutenant Tregooze;
And there is Sir Carnaby Jenks, of the Blues,
All come to see a man “die in his shoes!”

The clock strikes One! Supper is done,
And Sir Carnaby Jenks is full of his fun,
Singing “Jolly companions every one!”
My Lord Tomnoddy is drinking gin-toddy,
And laughing at ev’rything, and ev’rybody.
The clock strikes Two! and the clock strikes Three!
—“Who so merry, so merry as we?”

.
Sweetly, oh! sweetly, the morning breaks,
With roseate streaks,
Like the first faint blush on a maiden’s cheeks;

And see!—from forth that opening door
They come—he steps that threshold o’er
Who never shall tread upon threshold more!
—God! ’tis a fearsome thing to see
That pale wan man’s mute agony,—
—Oh! ’twas a fearsome sight! Ah me!
A deed to shudder at,—not to see.

The party of revelers wake to find they have overslept themselves and missed the execution.

“Hullo! Hullo! Here’s a rum go!
What’s to be done? We’ve missed all the fun!—”

“Nought could be done—nought could be said;
So—My Lord Tomnoddy went home to bed!”

One realizes the powerful effect that can be got by these contrasts—the intense denunciation of public executions and private heartlessness that the humor thus carries. Beside it “pure fun” seems rather pointless.

CHAPTER VI AN APPENDED SAMPLE

The Lost Anatomist.

To the chapter above I append certain verses of my own as an example of how and how not to write comic verse. Anybody using this book as a textbook for a class in Humor, should have the pupils pick out all the weak lines in the poem and replace them by good ones; then take all the other lines and replace them by better ones.

The scene of the poem is laid in Bristol, a city which unfortunately I do not know except as once seen after dark from a taxi cab with the blinds down. But even this partial view of it impressed me with the romance of its situation and its history. Its connection with the name of John Cabot, the explorer, and Prince Rupert of the Civil War, makes me feel certain that either the college or the town must have built a Cabot's Tower; and there must be down at the seaport of Bristol a Rupert's Quay. If not, there should be. It is also quite possible that the generosity of the Wills Family does not account for the whole of the college. But students should be made to see that these things don't matter. In art what counts is not whether things are true but whether they sound true. Thus O. Henry once wrote, "In Texas you can travel a thousand miles in a straight line." You can't, and he knew it. But it was a good way of saying that Texas is a big place.

Similarly, in the lines below, describing the morning mist rising over Lake St. Louis (which lies at the upper end of the Island of Montreal), I have no idea whether it does rise or not. But it is of no consequence. It is the art of the poet not to observe nature but to improve nature. The ridiculous notion that a poet should observe and set down all the details of scenery spoils a lot of good poetry. Personally, I never look at it. I only know that the slim white birch trees in Canada huddle together for warmth when the cold sweeps down the Laurentian hills because I happen to have seen them at it in passing.

Similarly, the student must be warned against the futility of an unknown reference. Now matter how apt a reference may be in actual fact, it is worse than useless for those who do not know what it means. If the mere *sound* of it is all right, then it may stand. Thus in the lines below it does not matter whether or not the reader understands the line, "moving, like life itself, towards a cataract unseen." It *sounds* right, and even if he does not know that the broad moving flood of Lake St. Louis sweeps down to the Rapids of Lachine, he suspects that there must be trouble

of some sort coming.

Nor does it matter to the poem that most of Bristol is not in Somerset at all. I needed it in Somerset to make the sea break on it with a proper sound. But against this take the lines in reference to “Burke and Hare” in connection with the study of anatomy, a reference that for most readers would miss its mark. These two, Burke and Hare, may be said to have founded the modern Edinburgh Medical School. In their day, a hundred years ago, the study of anatomy was hampered by the extraordinary prejudice against dissection, or the use of the dead body for the purpose of science. This prejudice Burke and Hare did not share; indeed they set themselves to remove it. Though not doctors, for they were both civilians, they threw themselves into the work of supplying scientific material for their adopted Alma Mater, a work which they laid down only when they had put Edinburgh practically where it is. Burke’s reflections on the French Revolution must have been gratifying, as the Reign of Terror effected for dissection, in France, the same reform as he made in England.

The verses were written, as appears from their title, as a few lines of Farewell to my illustrious colleague of many years standing, Professor Samuel (Tingle) Whitnall, whose name is elsewhere chronicled in this book, on the occasion of his leaving McGill University to take up the direction of the School of Anatomy at Bristol University, January 1935.

THE LOST ANATOMIST

A Legend of Bristol and McGill Universities—executed as a sample of Serious Relief introduced in Comic Verse.

PROLOGUE

Children of the Sea-shore of Somerset,
Over a hundred years from now.
A little wind passes, with Voices in it.

“My heart is wasting with its woe,
Anatomy! Anatomy!
I was a silly Ass to go,
Think that of me! Think that of me,”
A soothing murmur from the sea,
“Dichotomy! Dichotomy!
It’s got to be! It’s got to be.”

The little children turn and flee
“The teacher’s wraith’s beside the Zee!”

POEM BEGINS

In Bristowe’s Ancient City Fair
The Brothers Wills Virginia Weed
Has built a stately College where
All Somerset can learn to read;
Where Somerset, in college dress,
Learns to pronounce the letter S.

Now Bristowe’s Ancient Town they say,
Was once the Seat of Pirates bold
Whose ships came driving through the spray
With captive Maidens in the Hold,—
Girls from the Indies, deeply tanned,
And yellow girls from Samarkand,
Fat fuzzy-wuzzies from the Nile,
Just right for those that like that style,
You, who have only got one wife,
Reflect upon their wicked life!
Boys will be boys, Wills be Wills,
The pirate still their spirit fills;
Finding a thing their college missed
They stole McGill’s Anatomist.
They landed him, still dripping wet
Before admiring Somerset
Said Bristol girls on Rupert’s Quay—
“Oi never zeed the loikes o’ he!”

.

The captive Tingle is unbound
To turn the Wills’s capstan round.

.

In Bristol’s bright Dissecting Room,

Clear burns the Bristol gas;
Anatomy is on the boom
Since Tingle took the class.
There has not been such progress there
Since the great days of Burke and Hare.
Not since there was a Wessex King
Has quite such Chopping been the Thing
The boys and girls of Zomerzet
Say “Taacher, zürelly, ee is grët.”

And yet alas! He cannot hide
His life has got another side.
At times their teacher’s voice, so clear,
Sinks to pathetic tones,
At times there falls a silent tear
That drops upon the bones,
“Zir,” zez the class, “bët feeling yill?”
“Na, a bean thinking of McGill.”

McGill! McGill! McGill! The thought that will not down
Walking, walking, walking—walking through Bristowe’s Town
Fast up to Cabot’s Tower and back
Fast down to Rupert’s Quay.
Where the low tide has left its tract
Of sea weed by the sea,
He stands, to hear the Ocean roar,
While all the air is wet,
And the great seas from Labrador
Thunder on Somerset,
The Winter Seas that cannot rest
Still call with voices from the West,
Anatomy! Anatomy!
What’s that to me! What’s that to me!
The seething surges hiss and flee!
Morphology! Morphology!
More foolish he! More foolish he!

What time the world is bright with flowers

The sea spread far below,

What dreamings are his waking hours?

What visions does he know?

Beneath his step the daisies turn

That lie upon his path;

He only sees the maples burn

On distant Ste. Agathe,

And the huddled birches that would spurn

Winter's approaching wrath.

He sees once more the morning mist

Lifting beyond Lachine,

St. Louis, by the sunrise kissed,

Spreads wide its satin sheen,

Moving, like life itself, towards a cataract unseen.

Oh! Winter time in Bristowe's town

Is Drear as Drear can be

When the brief daylight closes down

And fog blows off the sea,

And the old stone walls and the narrow stones

Strike chill into the marrow bones.

Yet here is one that walks whose eyes

See visions of Cerulean skies

And the broad stretch of winter snow

Sparkling with diamonds below,

Beyond the gas-light's murky haze,

The snowflakes fall on Cote des Neiges.

And on his ear there echo back

The sleigh bells on the mountain track

The sleighbells on Mount Royal's hill,

Calling, "McGill, McGill, McGill!"

Sleighbells a-jingle, calling to Tingle

"Come back and mingle, Tingle, do.

And we'll all mingle, married and single,

Mingle, Tingle, mingle with you,—"

He starts,—awakening to the jar
Of Bristol's clattering Tramway Car,
The murky gas, the cobble stone
And his next talk of corpse and bone.

Thus do the years drag trailing past,
Forgotten as they go,
Each year seems longer than the last
Time's Tragedy is slow;
And gas-light walks and talks on bone,
Teach not a man to live alone.

The years move past, the years move on,
Fifty and then a hundred gone,
And still there runs in Bristowe's Town
A fearsome legend that will not down,
And still there runs in Montreal
A tale that is whispered but known to all
A legend of one who walks at night
At the turn of the year if the moon shines bright.

Now Bristowe's pride in the New Year's Tide
Is noisy and bold and free,
From the lordly bower by the Cabot's Tower
To the slums round Rupert's Quay
'Twas the time of Meeting the Pirates Greeting
In the Old Ill Days of the Sea—

For the men are tough and the girls are rough,—
It's the Old West Country way.
There is still the flood of the Wessex blood
In the sport they call their play,
And there's still the touch of the Pirate's clutch
When the lads are off for the day.
But they all stand back, silent and slack
From the One who walks their way
And they whisper anace "Ast a 'zeen a's faace!"

and they whisper apace, first a zoon a s' m'oo:
A mowt be a wraith!" they say.

In Montreal, on the mountain side,
When the New Year's moon falls clear,
A muffled figure is seen to glide,
To hide, and disappear.
A muffled figure that moves apace,
And leaves on the snow not a single trace.
Belated couples still out on skiis,
Shelter in terror behind the trees.
Or shoot like snow-birds down the wind,
To leave their ghastly fear behind.
For they know the story, at least the gist
Of the Ghost of the Bristol Scientist.
Who sold his anatomical soul
For Wills's Capstan Tobacco Bowl
And traded a first-class job at McGill,
For a cigarette and a pipe and a fill
But found when he died and went to his lot
McGill was known there and Bristol was not.
And English anatomy had no show
Where thermo-dynamics was all the go.
And he tries for a hundred years and a half
To get back to McGill on the Medical Staff.
And they know that the words that he mutters and moans
Are the list, in Greek, of the human bones.
But, by long disuse in his Bristol home,
Of his list of bones he's forgotten one,
A bone that in Bristol is still unknown
But used at McGill,—it's the Funny Bone.
But without that bone, say the Governors still,
Choose Hell, Choose Bristol, but not McGill.

CHAPTER VII

STORY TELLERS AND STORY KILLERS

Two Kinds of Funny Stories—The Hangman and the Pullman Porter—How Not to Tell a Story—Putting Walter Scott off at Buffalo.

When the study of humor becomes systematized and gets into the colleges, one of the most important courses will be the course on *How to Tell Funny Stories* (50 lectures, with demonstrations, and field work done on Pullman cars and at banquets and at funerals). There is here a real subject of study requiring for high success an original sense of humor together with an acquired technique and arduous practice. Even the theological colleges will put in such a course as a part of First Year Divinity.

Of funny stories there are, in point of construction, two kinds. In one kind all the fun, all the joke, turns on the dénouement, the end—what sometimes is called the “*nub*.” Ninety-nine per cent of all the stories told in America belong to this class. There is no fun, no amusement in the story until the end is reached. The listener must wait for it. He knows this and expects nothing till the end.

Thus for example:

There was a man who was greatly in the habit of exaggerating everything, and afterward feeling ashamed of having done so. So he said to his wife one evening when they were going out to a dinner party, “Tonight if you hear me exaggerating anything make a sign across the table and I’ll stop it.”

At dinner he got to boasting about the big conservatory they had at his home when he was a boy. “It was,” he said, “let me see, oh, easily a hundred feet long and I should say about sixty feet high.” At this moment he got the sign from his wife, checked himself and added very quietly—“but of course it was only about 18 inches wide.”

(Incidental exercise for students: Which is the best dimension to use as the one that the man is going to shorten? Certainly not the length, because that naturally comes first; but how would it be to say—a hundred feet long, and about forty feet wide—but of course it was only 18 inches high?)

The analysis of the humor here turns on the question of correcting an exaggeration by altering a dimension in terms of cubic contents. The correction is

perfectly valid in physical science but the incongruity lies in the false parallel between correcting a physical magnitude and correcting a mental impression; also in the quite impossible and incongruous shape finally given to the conservatory.

But for the moment we are not concerned with the mode of humor but with the construction of the story.

In some cases the setting of the “nub” story is so simple that the “introduction” is reduced to a mere sentence or two—thus:

There was an Irish sailor who was always very slow in going aloft. But once by a great effort he beat all the others and got up to the royal yard before them. “Hooray!” he said, “here I am first at last. I was always behind before.”

Where the introduction is as short as this we can hardly call the thing a “funny story.” It’s only a quotation of a funny phrase. But the typical story of this class, if it is to be a good one, needs just enough introduction to give it a real setting, just enough to attract interest without fatiguing it, and then the unexpected close—the more unexpected the better. Take as a type:

A man, sitting with a friend at a theater, said to him between the acts: “Do look across at that woman in the box next the stage. Did you ever see such a fright?”

The man looked, and said, with evidence embarrassment, “That’s my sister.”

“No, no,” said the first speaker, trying to save the situation. “I don’t mean the one you’re looking at. I mean the awful-looking guy at the other side of the box.”

“That,” said his friend, “is my wife.”

But of course with this class of funny story, the story with the *nub*, everything depends on not getting prolix, on not fatiguing the hearer. Here is where ninety-nine story tellers out of a hundred—as will be shown later—fail hopelessly. And this is why the “funny story” often becomes—one might say generally becomes—a social nuisance.

But for the moment turn to the other class, the far smaller class, of funny stories. In these the story is amusing all through, not the end alone but the steady current of the narrative. We laugh as we listen. In the case of the *nub* story, the listener

agonizes and then explodes. With the other kind he comes to a boil and stays there. The story is interesting, and even amusing, all through, without waiting for the *nub*, by reason of something in the setting and the circumstance. Here is an excellent example for the authenticity of which I can give a personal guarantee. I reproduce the story as I heard it told by my gallant and witty friend Major Charlie Greenshields of the Montreal bar. He said:

I was coming on the train the other day from Toronto to Montreal and was in the Pullman smoking room talking with three or four fellows. At Kingston Junction a man got in, a very quiet man, he seemed, and sat down and lit a pipe.

Then someone said, "I beg your pardon. You're Allison, aren't you?"

The man said "yes," and then everybody fell silent because the fellows all knew that Allison is the hangman.

Then the fellow who had spoken before said, "You've been up at Kingston for—"

He didn't need to finish the sentence because the fellows all knew that a man had been hanged there that day at Kingston.

"Yes," the hangman said, "at eight o'clock this morning."

"Everything go all right?" asked the other man.

"Yes, first rate, no hitch at all."

Meantime the porter of the car had come along and stood listening in the doorway, his mouth wide open with interest, his eyes popping, his ears on end.

"I was a little afraid about it," the hangman went on. "You see"—and here he looked round at the crowd and spoke in a more confidential tone—"I generally size up a man, pretty accurately, his height and his weight and all that, so as to get the drop right."

There was a murmur of "yes," "yes," all round, in a sort of awestricken tone.

"But this was different," said the hangman "this was a colored man—"

The porter fairly jumped in his tracks.

"A coloured man, about the size of the porter there, in fact much the same build—"

A perfect convulsion shook the porter. He fairly gasped. His eyes were glued on the hangman. He felt himself on the scaffold.

"However," the hangman concluded in a reassuring tone, "everything

went all right—fine.”

With that he sat back and went on smoking.

All the rest of the trip the nigger hung round the hangman, fascinated; passed the matches to him; wiped the window sill; picked up anything he dropped. At the end of the journey he came and dusted him off, as gently as if he were a museum specimen.

“Here,” said the hangman, giving him a quarter, “you’ve certainly been most attentive. *I hope I see you again.*”

“And if you *do*, boss,” said the nigger, quivering with anxiety, “Ah hope it’ll be in a Pullman car.”

There: that story in a college course on humor could be made the subject of an entire lecture. Observe the extraneous interest that is lit up at once, like a lamp, by the fact that the incoming passenger is a hangman—an interest that rekindles when he speaks of the technical aspect of his profession. Notice that the amusement doesn’t have to wait for the end. It begins with the first appearance of the porter, and it is clinched and driven home by the final stroke at the end.

Of course such a story is still further heightened when narrated by a finished raconteur, such as is my friend. A few appropriate gestures and we see the spasms of the porter; the lolling of a tongue for a fraction of a second suggests the expression of his face; a change and a drop in tone calls up the hideous fascination of a hanging; the plain casual, louder, words, “a man like the porter there,” bring a sort of instant comic relief.

Yet even with ordinary narration such a story ranks a long way up.

But observe how a third-class story teller could smash it up.

He begins:

“I was on the train the other day from Toronto to Montreal—well, as a matter of fact I only got on at Belleville, but that’s neither here nor there—or wait, now, was it Belleville? Well, anyway it doesn’t matter,—”

Chorus, of listeners: “No, no, it doesn’t matter.”

The story teller continues:

“Well, when we got to Kingston Junction—the Canadian National you know doesn’t go right into Kingston; there’s a little shuttle train runs up and down—”

“Oh, yes, and say!” breaks in one of the listeners, “they say they’re going to cut out that shuttle train altogether.”

“What’s the idea?” asks someone else.

“Oh, they say nearly all the people ride up and down in their motor cars anyway, and so they’ll just leave it for the private cars and the taxis. Isn’t it a caution the way the motor cars are killing the local traffic? You know that radial line that goes up to Jackson’s Point, well—but I’m afraid I’m interrupting your story.”

“No, no,” says the story man, “it’s all right.”

“Well, I was just saying that they’re going to take those electric cars off, that’s all. But go on with your story.”

“Well,” resumes the story teller, “when we got to Kingston Junction —”

And with that he is off on the second lap: in time he’ll finish.

Even where a story depends mainly on the *nub* and would get along with nothing else except plain narration, the story is lifted into a higher class when told by a comedian or raconteur capable of embellishing it. A good example is offered by a story that was for uncounted nights related by my worthy friend Al Jolson from the stage of the Winter Garden Theater in New York. It was afterward so widely repeated that no doubt most readers have heard it. But it is re-introduced here in the interests of science. This is the story:

A certain wealthy Jew came to Harvard University to enter his son as a student. He was especially anxious to have him taught to speak English correctly and without a Yiddish accent. “I vant him taught the way you spigg here,” he said, “and I vant you should take him in hand yourself and give him brivate instructions.” “Well,” said the Harvard professor of English, speaking with that large, cultivated accent that marks the place and the subject, “I shall certainly be glad to do so. We rather flatter ourselves here on our English.”

The Jew went away and returned a few months later.

“Vell!” he asked, “and how is my boy getting on mid his English?”

“Oh,” said the professor, “he is megging brogress, goot brogress. I togg mid him effery day.”

The story is a good one in any case, and almost story-teller-proof. But with a masterly imitation of voices and accents it reaches to the highest class.

This shows the reason why the “dialect” stories flourish—the Jewish stories, the

Negro stories and the Irish stories. Apart from the particular point or climax, they offer the amusement of the accent; they draw, in other words, upon the domain of “fun with words” in which belong puns and parodies, bad spelling, spoonerisms and all such. Like all these, they become infinitely tiresome when badly done, far worse than simple honest conscientious narration ever can be. Anyone can listen with tolerance and forgiveness to an honest narrator of a story, merely trying to get it over, for its own sake, with no pretense of art. But the narrator imitating a Jew or pretending to be a nigger, steps on to other ground. He’s trying to be funny himself. People resent it if he can’t do it. It is the penalty paid by unsuccessful art. Nor does good intention condone it. A man may do his damndest to play the trombone, and yet excite anger.

All of which serves to introduce some of the chief faults and fallacies to be noted and avoided in telling funny stories.

Fallacy No. 1—The Pointless Story

It often happens that the narrator, fascinated by his own actual recollection of what happened, does not realize that he is quite unable to convey it. So he puts the story over, without the point.

I remember a particular instance of this in the case of Jim Thorpe, a hotel man in my native village—proprietor and bar-keeper both, as they used to be in the old days of the country tavern. Jim would stand endlessly wiping up the beer on the bar, and listening to the boys talk, and joining in. One day somebody casually mentioned a certain Dr. Bentley.

“Well, sir,” said Jim, pausing in his wiping, “the Doc’s a pretty smart man on the uptake. He always comes back at ’em pretty quick. I had to laugh here yesterday when he came in and some of the boys was here and Bill Thayer began to gag Doctor on that old horse of his. ‘Well, Doc,’ he says, ‘I hear your horse is going to run against J. I. C.’ That’s the horse you know that won out last week.”

“And what did the Doctor say, Jim?” asked the boys.

“Well, sir, he just up as quick as that and sez he—Well I forgot just what he said, but he give him a good answer!”

My bygone friend’s failure only represents, reduced to its simplest form, the failure of countless attempts at narrating something funny from actual experience. The

fallacies lie in thinking that, because a thing was funny in actual fact, the mere assertion that it was funny will make it so. Women especially fall into this error.

Example: Amusing Incident related a million times by a million girls, the words in parentheses representing the thoughts of the listener.

We had such a funny experience when we were traveling in Wales, one afternoon when we went for a climb on Plingommon. Half way up the mountain there was the funniest little cottage and sitting outside it the funniest old couple you ever saw. You'd have died laughing at them.

(Would I? I doubt it.)

The old man was simply *too* amusing. We asked him how much further it was to the top of Plingommon, and he put his hand up to his ear and said, "Eh what?" in the queerest way. It was just a scream.

(It must have been.)

So we asked the little old woman and all she could say was, "O! aye!"

It was simply killing.

(Yes, I feel dead already.)

Sometimes, however, the very *pointlessness* of a story may be turned into point, and the sheer utter emptiness of it make it incongruous and funny. Thus:

"Your mention of Ventnor," said the retired Anglo-Indian colonel to his assembled friends at the dinner table, "reminds me of a most—er—extraordinary—er—coincidence in my own life, connected—er—with it. I went down there years and years ago with my—er—wife on our—er—er honeymoon. We were swimming in the sea just beside the—er—jetty and my wife dropped her ring and it fell into the—er—water and we tried and tried and simply couldn't find it. Well, we were in—er—India for years and years and when we came home last year we went down again to—er—Ventnor. And my wife said—er—"Why this is where I lost my ring just beside the—er—jetty. Do let's see if we can find it.' So just in a spirit of—er—bravado, so to speak, we went and fished round among the—er—shingle, the loose stones, you know."

"And you found it?" asked a listener.

"Er—no, we didn't; extraordinary thing; we—er looked all over, and we didn't—er—find it. Coincidence, wasn't it?"

I acknowledge this story as the personal property of my gifted ex-colleague Professor Whitnall of McGill University. He is able to narrate it with a running accompaniment of sputterings something like the noise of a bathroom tap half full of air, which he assures me is the sound made by a retired Anglo-Indian colonel.

A similar pointlessness is found in the unsuccessful attempt to make the story interesting by reason of its setting. This is the converse of the hangman story quoted above. The case is often seen where the supposedly funny story is told about illustrious or aristocratic people, the result being utterly flat. I have elsewhere applied to these stories the name of “aristocratic anecdotes.” Once the type is understood there is no trouble in reproducing them. But there is no need to make them up. They can be found in any quantity in any book appearing with such a title as *Twenty Years at the Court of Queen Isabella Maria Amelia*, by Lady de Wish-Wash; *Crowned Heads I Have Knocked Together*, by Colonel the Hon. Fitzfizzle Bang; *Inside the Yildiz Kiosk*, by Major Sneak; and *Downing Street from the Back*, by “Scrutinax.”

Here are a couple of samples of such stories, taken from a bygone book of mine which a few people may still remember with kindness.

I—Anecdote of the Duke of Strathythan

Lady Ranelagh writes:

“The Duke of Strathythan—I am writing of course of the seventeenth Duke, not of his present Grace—was, as everybody knows, famous for his hospitality. It was not perhaps generally known that the Duke was as witty as he was hospitable. I recall a most amusing incident that happened the last time but two that I was staying at Strathythan Towers. As we sat down to lunch—we were a very small and intimate party, there being only forty-three of us—the Duke, who was at the head of the table, looked up from the roast of beef that he was carving, and, running his eye about the guests, was heard to murmur, ‘I’m afraid there isn’t enough beef to go round.’

“There was nothing to do, of course, but to roar with laughter, and the incident passed off with perfect *savoir-faire*.”

II—Tenderness of A Queen

Lady de W. writes:

“My dear mistress, the late Queen of Saxe-Covia-Slitz-in-Mein, was of a most tender and sympathetic disposition. The goodness of her heart broke forth on all occasions. I well remember how one day, on seeing a

cabman in the Poodel Platz kicking his horse in the stomach, she stopped in her walk and said, ‘Oh, poor horse! If he goes on kicking it like that he’ll hurt it.’”

But quite apart from Pointlessness, or missing out the Point, there are plenty of other ways of killing a funny story. Among these is (2) the *Fallacy of Running Corrections*.

In this terrible type of narration the speaker keeps correcting himself, and appealing to his memory for reconsideration. Thus:

I was traveling last winter in Scotland (he says), and we came to a little place in the Highlands, Bally-hooly—or, wait a bit, was it Bally-hooly? No, I don’t believe it was. Wait a bit, I’ll get it in a minute, Ballycooly, that’s it, Ballycooly.

We were to take the ferry there to go across Loch Hooch into Loch Haggis—or, no, I believe it was the other way from Loch Haggis into Loch Hooch—or is it the other way? Well, anyway it was either from Loch Hooch into Loch Haggis or from Loch Haggis into Loch Hooch—it doesn’t really matter which it was—

Quite so. It doesn’t really matter. But unfortunately the narrator doesn’t realize this till the story—even if it amounts to one—is killed to death.

Very similar is (3) the *Fallacy of the Needless Introduction*. It is the art of a good story teller that he knows where to begin; the fault of the bad story killer is that he doesn’t. The bad story teller is so afraid of leaving anything out, so afraid of not getting the setting of the story properly presented that his story is all beginning and little or no end. The habit and custom of a long introduction has come down to us from other and more leisurely times. We have no time for it now.

It was the custom of Sir Walter Scott to open his novels with a vast chapter called *Introduction*. But when he had written it he generally felt that he was beginning the thing too suddenly. So he put in front of it a chapter called *Preliminary*; and, when even that seemed abrupt, he set before it what he called a *Prologue*. This, with a *Preface* to precede it, served to start the story off.

Now this was all right for Walter Scott’s novels. It was like digging a deep foundation for a vast structure. It was like the gradual kindling of a blazing fire whose warmth is to go in all directions. Readers who survived the introduction—and in Scott’s day all readers did—got their reward in the deep absorption that grew upon

them as the story developed. Readers in those days read little but read deeply. A few books covered a lifetime. Readers now read much and thinly. In the old days the reader's mind was saturated by what he read; now it is just a thin coat of varnish over his bald head.

Scott has paid the penalty. Modern readers, nine out of ten, and even ten out of nine, have no time for him. Those who have, find the absorption still there.

But what applies to Walter Scott will not apply to the telling of a funny story. To preface it with a long introduction is as cruel as it is unkind. Yet many story tellers cannot help putting in the introduction.

Thus, suppose one of these unlicensed and incompetent story tellers wants to tell you any one of the stories quoted above. He begins it like this:

I heard a good story the other day. I was driving over to Guelph—it's quicker, you know, than going on the train because you cut across country. I guess you must save twenty miles. But we had a lot of trouble with the engine (my brother-in-law was with us) and neither of us know much about an engine. So at last we laid the car up in a garage and decided to go on in a bus. There is a bus, you know that we could get on the old Dundas Road (at least partly on the old Dundas Road). At any rate we decided to take it. But by this time it was getting late and I looked at my watch and I said to my brother-in-law "By jove, it's getting late. I think we'd better go in and get some food in the hotel." So anyway we went in to get some food; and there at the table was a man that I know as well as I know you, though I'm hanged if I can think of his name. However, he'd only just begun dinner, so Will and I sat down beside him and we got talking and he told us what seemed a darned funny story—but perhaps you've heard this—

And with that, after being assured about a dozen times that you haven't heard the story, he tells it. Which introduces another Fallacy in story killing familiar to every sufferer,—(4) the *Fallacy of Asking Whether the Listener Has Heard It Before*. Don't ask whether he has heard it. He won't say so anyway. Here's an example:

I heard a darned funny story last night—I don't know whether you have heard this. There was an Irish soldier came home from serving in India—have you heard this?—and he went to the pension office wherever it is—have you heard this?—to see if there was any back pay or pension

or whatever it was coming to him; and in the office was a very pompous sort of chap with a gold eyeglass—have you heard this?—and Pat says to him—but perhaps you’ve heard this—

The only way to deal with the situation is to say very quietly, “Yes, I heard it.” Even if you didn’t it doesn’t matter. He’ll tell it again.

(5) *The Crab Fashion Story*. In this kind of story the narrator keeps moving backward instead of forward. Each item that he mentions suggests to him something that went before. But for timely interruptions he would never end. Example: the narrator begins:

What you say about the darkies reminds me of a funny story I’ve heard my father tell about his old days in Georgia. Father’s people, of course, didn’t really come from Georgia; they moved in there after the war; before that they belonged in Mississippi right close to Vicksburg. I know I’ve heard father say that from the high bluff at Vicksburg you could see the roof of the old plantation. His people hadn’t built it, though. It was originally built, so they say, by one of the ancestors of Jefferson Davis—

By this time the narrator is moving backward so fast that nothing will stop him, till he bumps into Christopher Columbus. But he has a sort of subconscious sense that warns him, and he presently gives himself a new start, like this:

However, to make a long story short, when father lived in Georgia there used to be revival meetings among the darkies where the preacher, don’t you know, would get them all worked up and hysterical and getting the powers and all that. Of course father and the other boys in the family were not allowed to go to the meetings because the family had been brought up Episcopalian. In fact mother’s grandfather, she was one of the Slopes of West Virginia—I don’t know if you ever heard of him—was the Rev. Alleghany Slope who wrote a book called *Walking Upward and Slipping Backward* that was very highly thought of; in fact he taught in the seminary at Oil City. However, to make a long story short—

And with that the narrator is back at the camp meeting for a new start. Incidentally no long story was ever made short. On the contrary, short stories are made long.

Consider here as a final illustration of the mechanism of story telling the way in which one and the same story might be told by different narrators. We can take one of the most familiar of American stories, known to everybody and not needing quotation at full length, the story of the man who was “put off at Buffalo.” Reduced to a few words it amounts to this:

A man before going to bed in a Pullman car said to the porter, “We pass Buffalo at three o’clock in the morning. See that I get off there. Even if I am sleepy and refuse to get up, you just put me off.” Next morning the man woke up in broad daylight to find the train long past Buffalo. “Why didn’t you put me off?” he asked angrily. The porter looked dumbfounded. “If I didn’t put you off, who on earth was that man who fought so hard when I threw him off at Buffalo at three o’clock this morning?”

Here is the same story:

I—AS RELATED BY HIEROCLES OF ATHENS B.C. 500

Two countrymen, having accepted a ride (or, perhaps, having been invited to a ride) in a carrier’s cart (or, perhaps, in a four wheeled Prospectus), this one desiring to go to Corinth and that one on the other hand desiring to go to Megara, the carrier let down this one at Megara and that one at Corinth.

II—AS TOLD BY THE ANGLO-INDIAN COLONEL MENTIONED ABOVE

A rather—er—surprising incident happened to a friend of mine—a—er—retired Indian officer like myself. He was traveling in your country and the train was—er—getting to one of your towns called—er—Buffalo. He was in one of what you call—er—sleepers, I believe, and he said to the saice—er—I mean the porter: “Be sure to wake me at Buffalo.” He said, “Even if I seem—er—disinclined to turn out, be sure to get me awake and—er—put me off at Buffalo.” Well the—er—saice, at least the porter promised most faithfully and in the morning forgot—er—utterly and entirely to do so. My friend was carried on to another of your towns called I think—er—Cleveland.

III—AS TOLD BY SIR WALTER SCOTT

The market town of Buffalo is pleasantly situated at the point where Lake Erie, the broad surface of its waters swollen from the multitudinous streams which have gathered from the furthest confines of the Superior Lake and the Lakes of Michigan and Huron, themselves no inconsiderable bodies of that fluid without which mankind would perish, empties itself into the wide flood of the Niagara River, where its waters, as if conscious of an impending fate, move with a gathering speed in their progress toward the stygian abyss of Niagara. The town itself, known as Buffalo, from its having been from time immemorial the watering place of the vast herds of bison which formerly frequented the region, is a rising frontier settlement of some ten thousand souls. It contains a number of fine edifices, including several churches built of timber, and a handsome courthouse and a jail of stone.

Toward this fair town of Buffalo on a certain evening in early summer there might have been seen approaching one of those vehicles called trains newly introduced both in the old world and the new whose speed already rivals that of the fleetest coaches. The way along which it passed presented a scene of wild if not unattractive beauty. The forest which lined each side of the narrow clearance was thickly hung with sassafras, sumach and succotash while the bright hues of the magnolia broke the lively green of the cucumis melo and the darker foliage of the iguanadon. In the marshier ditches which lined the track the light antelope paused a moment to view the passing wonder before plunging into the forest, or the heavy buffalo stood, immovable and silent, as if resenting this intrusion upon his immemorial domain.

Seated within the train, a traveler whose alert and evident curiosity proclaimed him a stranger to the locality, eyed alternately the passing forest and the interior of the flying car. He was a man of about forty whose well set features and firmly knit frame showed him to be a person of resolution, while his iron gray hair and face bronzed by the sun of a dozen climes showed him not unacquainted with situations of emergency and danger.

Strathgellert, for such was the traveler's cognomen, presently withdrew his eyes from the landscape over which the shadows of approaching night were already falling, and summoned to his side the faithful African attendant whose ministering services were engaged in

surrounding the traveler with every comfort possible.

“Porter,” said Strathgellert using to the attendant the name commonly employed in the wilds of America to those of his office, “I am informed that we may expect to reach the town of Buffalo at any advanced hour of the night, nay, I might rather say, at an early hour of the morrow?” The porter, his face illuminated by one of those broad grins which are at once the characteristic and the charm of his race, indicated his assent. “In that case,” said Strathgellert, “I desire you to call me in time to allow time to dress and get down at Buffalo; be certain to see that I am awake, nay, if need be, use every exertion to make me so, and see to it that I do not at such an early hour seek to foist you off with excuses; in a word, my good fellow, put me off at Buffalo.”

The African hastened to assure our traveler of his devotion and, with the fidelity of his race, pledged himself to the desired service. Strathgellert, already fatigued with the events of the day as narrated in the preceding chapter, and his senses rendered drowsy by the falling darkness and the rhythmical motion of the flying vehicle, extended himself on one of the couches or berths with which the sleeping cars of America are provided, and, commending himself briefly to that Providence which alone can bring them safely to their destination, was not long in falling into that deep and profound slumber known to the seafarer and the traveler.

CHAPTER 2

The sun rose brightly over the broad and placid bosom of Lake Erie, illuminating it from its east end up, while along its shores a flying train, its pace continually increasing, passed rapidly along the broad reaches of sand and marsh which fringe the low outline of the lake and indicate the territory where the domain of the terrible Seneca gives place to that of the milder and more tractable Pottawottomie. It was at about nine of the clock when a traveler occupying one of the lower bunks or berths put his head out from the curtains which screened it from the inquisitive eye, into the body of the car now flooded with the broad sunshine of the day and asked in a tone of eagerness which brooked of no denial, “Have we passed Buffalo?” The faithful African whose vigil had lasted unbroken and without complaint since the evening before, hastened to the side of Strathgellert, for our readers have divined that he it was, and said in a humble and ingratiating tone, “Sir, we are just coming into Ashtabula.”

Strathgellert leaped from his couch his eyes aflame. "Foul negro," he exclaimed, "we have passed Buffalo; deny it not; and why, sirrah, did you not put me off at Buffalo?" The African, falling on one knee and with outstretched hands imploring the pity of his angered master, replied, in tones in which respect and submission struggled with anxiety and trepidation, "Sir, I did put you off; or if it wasn't you, who indeed was the man whom I, with these hands, ejected from the car, struggling vainly against my reluctant exercise of force?"

Here indeed was mystery. Strathgellert was about to seize the unhappy negro by the neck when his arm was arrested by an occurrence, so strange, and so unaccountable that we reserve it for our reader's consideration in a later chapter.

CHAPTER VIII

NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Our Comic Nations—Is There National Humor—American Humor—Mr. Punch and English Humor—The Irish Bull—The Grim Humor of Scotland.

The idea of national characteristics has been greatly overdone. It comes down to us as a legacy of the past when a man living in France lived in a quite different way from that of an Englishman, and both of them were similarly separated from Italians and Arabs and equatorial Pygmies—different clothes, different houses, different food and different habits and different religions. This of necessity carried with it a difference of thought. But in the world in which we live all this is passing away. Frenchmen play football, Arabs go in for boxing and Pygmies take piano lessons. Africans come to Europe to learn, and Europeans go to Africa to forget. American missionaries spread Christianity among the Hindoos, and Hindoos teach Buddhism in Omaha. Through it all is heard the unending voice of the radio, and is seen the universal flicker of the cinema. The world is being unified into one, and the human race being standardized into a type.

Go where you will, there is the same increasing overgrowth of sameness. If Dr. Livingstone could come to life again and visit the scenes of his explorations in the Upper Basin of the Congo, he would find a Rotary Club, a Women's Fortnightly Lunch Club, Boy Scouts celebrating Mother's Day, and Natives returning for Old Home Week. If Balboa climbed again the heights of Panama to gaze out upon the Pacific, they would certainly expect him to make a luncheon speech as the guest of the Panama Club.

Whether this is good or bad, whether it means advance or decline, progress or stagnation, is not here in question. Probably it is a good thing. Just now the whole aim and effort of the world should be to avoid war. We know how, but we can't do it. Economic nationalism, just when it should have faded out of the world, has broken out more virulent than ever. Leagues of nations won't work as long as there are nations that need leaguings. When the nations are ready to form a league, and obey it, they won't need a league any more. Nor is force any use as the *ultima ratio*. Science has so utterly overdone it that there is nothing in it except mutual destruction. Everybody can kill everybody.

In this gloomy outlook the only bright spot on the horizon is the increasing standardization of mankind. The realization that we are all just about the same kind of people may create the kind of world-consciousness that will one day replace

nationality.

Meantime that is rather far away.

Nor is there anywhere where nationality and national differences have been worked harder than in the domain of humor. The comic press has long since created a set of national types very largely imaginary except in so far as they had a historic origin and preserve a faint survival of it. The novel, the stage and the screen help to keep them going, poor mock figures that they are, Pat and Sandy and Alphonse, John and Jonathan, Tony and Fritz, and even Sambo and Fuzzy Wuzzy—like a set of scarecrows on a clothesline flapping in the wind.

Look at them. Here is the imaginary Frenchman—always called Alphonse or Gaston (yet statistics show that only one Frenchman in 100,000 is called Alphonse; mostly they are called Bill or Pete); wears a stovepipe hat and a bell-shaped coat; eats frogs; prefers other men's wives to his own; excellent taste, but inferior morals.

The imaginary Englishman—tall and lackadaisical; hay-colored hair and a huge straw-colored mustache; face purple; only one eye, the other being glass; says “ripping” and “topping;” served in the Guards (Gahds) in the “Baw Waw.”

Scotchman—says “Hoot awa’ wi ye”; is very dour and grim; prefers wet weather to sunshine; likes the notion of hell; hopes to go there—less expensive than Heaven.

Irishman—always merry; says “arrah! bigorrah, mavourneen, macooshlah, bismallah!”; twirls a shillelagh; likes a fight; has no respect for the law; makes a fine policeman.

Based on these types the comic Frenchman and the comic Englishman and the rest are turned loose upon literature and the stage.

But in reality the various kinds of national humor differ only about as much and as little as national thought. What makes them seem different is, for one thing, that you can't translate humor. You can translate a scientific statement but not a joke. You can say with equal force in every language, “The angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal.” Even in Esperanto “*as angelos as basos as triangolos as equalos*” seems to keep its force. But the language of humor—at least its technical and verbal forms—defies translation. That puts a barrier at once between the expression of humor from nation to nation unknown in the case of science. An equally great barrier is found in the fact that a great mass of current humor is fragmentary, topical and deals with the affairs of day to day. Jokes about the NRA in America are as unfathomable in London as jokes about the Welsh Church are in New York. Why is it that a great many Americans (quite a lot,—you'll find some everywhere) don't read *Punch*? Because they couldn't appreciate the humor? Not

at all. They could. But they don't know what it is about. Give them a good training in an English public school and ten years' residence in England, and they'd enjoy it. French jokes in *Le Rire* about Monsieur Doumergue or Monsieur Flandin may be very funny, but you have to know who Monsieur Doumergue and Monsieur Flandin are to get them right. And who ever heard of them? Some jokes and many pictures are based on universals, but the bulk are not.

But within the limits thus indicated one can at any rate find a certain distinctive individuality that marks the humor of each country. No doubt as the nations unify and standardize out of existence, the distinction will tend to fade. Already there is practically only one kind of moving picture.

American humor as it developed in the nineteenth century, from a grin to a laugh, certainly stood out from that of the rest of the world. It was distinctly the product of a new country, a new environment from which people could look back to older civilization with unprejudiced vision. Up on top of the Rockies, at Virginia City, Nevada, Mark Twain and Artemus Ward could see Europe better than could the people walking in the Rue de Rivoli or sitting round the Forum in Rome. But as this topic has already been discussed above in connection with Mark Twain, there is no need to treat it here.

Turn to English Humor—English, not British—for each section of the British Isles has its own way of laughing, except Wales, which doesn't. I may do the place an injustice, but the outside world connects Wales with "bards," who throw themselves (fortunately) into "Conway's foaming flood," as a means of spiting the English, but whose talent does not run to fun.

The distinguishing feature of English humor of the highest type is its fidelity to facts. It depicts and it describes things as they actually happened, or as they actually could have happened, without exaggeration, without distortion. Take the case of line drawing, black and white, as it appears, for instance, in the pages of *Punch*. The wonderful series of amusing and satirical cartoons that have adorned *Punch*, from the days of Tenniel and George DuMaurier to those of Bernard Partridge and Ravenhill, are exact—literal. If Mr. Punch wants to draw a jolly old gentleman, he draws a jolly old gentleman, a real one. An American artist—or at least many American artists—would draw merely an exactly round circle for his face, the segment of a curve for his mouth and two dots for his eyes. For the American reader the fun—the humor—incongruity—consists in the realization that, after all, that is all

that a jolly old gentleman really is—a circle and a couple of dots. Some of the American effects, one must admit, are quite extraordinary. Benevolence is reduced to a circle. Horror is represented by one hair standing on end and perplexity by a distention of the eyeball.

Of course, not all English drawings are literal. There are exceptions. It would be difficult to imagine actual human beings with faces quite so malicious, with teeth quite so gnashing as those of Mr. H. M. Bateman; or with heads quite so bulbous, and expressions quite so seraphic as those of Mr. Heath Robinson. There is, too, a certain minor amount of symbolism that substitutes a few lines for a completed figure, a few zigzags to indicate motion; or the remembered art of Phil May, marvelous not in what it put in, but in what it left out. But all of this mode is not the true British type but flourishes better among the cartoonists of America who reduced Theodore Roosevelt to a box of teeth, his namesake to a forehead, and by whom Andy Gump of the comic supplement is made singularly true to life by leaving out all of his face below the mustache.

As with the humor of drawings, so with the humor of the written word. Again one may take the genial pages of *Punch* as representing the highest type, the last word in English humor. Mr. Punch was born nearly a hundred years ago and as a child lived in a rough atmosphere of horseplay, puns and cheaper comicalities forgotten now. It has been like the gradual development of a rough medical student into a consulting physician, or of a rickety law student into a judge.

The true *Punch* joke states something that is of course made-up but which perhaps actually happened or could have happened. Here is, to my mind, the most typical *Punch* joke of modern times. It appeared *just after the War*, a fact which gave it its significance. There is a picture showing “veteran volunteer marksman” (a lackadaisical gentleman with a flowing mustache and a fatuous expression) leaning on the mantelpiece of a sitting room and talking with a returned officer in uniform. The dialogue runs:

Officer. You’ll be glad to have the Bisley rifle meeting revived.

Marksman. Yes. But there will be some poor scoring. You see there’s been no serious shooting for the last four years.

Now this is wonderful! The more you look into it the deeper it gets—like a shadowed pool. No serious shooting! From 1914 to 1918. Well no—not if you take shooting in the high sense of nice marksmanship! How completely are the values concerned turned upside down! One catches, underlying this joke a deep and illusive

reflection on the vanity of human "life."

There are of course certain things in *Punch* which are for English people and English only—not that that is anything against it. Such is the hardy perennial of the humor of the hunting field—riders being dumped off over their horses' heads, horses that balk, and, more than all, the "dear old huntsman," a quaint figure beloved by the nation, a sort of legend and idol. Those who live in the outer world cannot feel the appeal of this. To us hunting is cruel. Running an animal to death by bursting its lungs from overexertion or by being torn to pieces by dogs when overtaken seems to us a hideous thing. If a fox has to be killed to prevent damage to the poultry, kill it with a shotgun. Go and sit at night beside its hole, waiting for it with a loaded gun. An Ontario farmer, thus musing in the moonlight as he waits for a ground-hog, is a romantic, a poetic sight—a piece of still life far beyond the noise and dirt of a fox hunt.

When I was a little boy in England, sixty years ago, I was taught that fox hunting was not cruel because the fox enjoyed it, but that running hares to death was wicked because the hare didn't like it. To get the full nonsense of this one must shift the scene to Spain. No doubt little Spanish boys are taught that the bull thoroughly enjoys a bull fight. What is more there is no doubt he *does* enjoy his innings when he gets it. If I had horns I could myself enjoy ripping a matador up the stomach and watching his salary fall out. The fox never gets an innings, and suffers as suffers any living creature, hunted and torn.

The English think bull fighting cruel. Yet if there were a Spanish paper, *El Punchedo de Madrid*, it would have pictures of "dear old matadors," called "Jarge" (or the Spanish for it) cutting off the bull's tail as a "brush" to give to one of the ladies. As a matter of fact the Madrid illustrated papers do carry, all the time, pictures of matadors labeled as "*el mas popular de neustros matadores*" or Señor So-and-So "the favorite toreador of the children," whose benefit will be given in the ring next week when it is hoped that the little folks will turn out en masse to acclaim him.

Let us, just for fun, take one or two hunting jokes out of *Punch* and turn them into Spanish.

PUNCH JOKE:

Belated Sportsman. (Arriving just as hounds are moving off after breaking up their fox.) "I've seen your hunted fox; he's behind, just over the road."

Huntsman. "The 'unted fox is inside my 'ounds, sir."

SPANISH VERSION:

Belated Spectator. (Arriving in the grand stand just after the Grand Finale.)
“Why where’s the bull?”

Charming Gallery attendant. (*Gravioso Mozo de galeria.*) “Hay lo allé!—
See those patches of beefsteak out on the sand!”

PUNCH JOKE:

Huntsman. (To irate farmer.) “Never ’eard such language in my born days. I’m
ashamed for the ’ounds to over ’ear it.”

SPANISH VERSION:

Indignant Toreador. (To gents making a demonstration in the bleachers.)
“Señors! Señors! Don’t use such foul language. The bull won’t stand for it.”

PUNCH JOKE:

Old Huntsman. (After a warm morning cubbing, having swallowed a pint.)
“Nice drop o’ beer that. I wish I ’ad time to get off and ’ave some.”

SPANISH FORM OF THE JOKE:

Dear Old Matador. (After having given the bull a couple of jabs and then drunk
a quart of malaga handed to him from the grand stand.) “Nice wine that, when I get
done with this bull, I’ll take a real drink of it.”

But after all Mr. Punch didn’t create fox hunting, never rides to hounds himself,
owing to his physicality, and in any case, being British, couldn’t understand a word
of what is written above, and wouldn’t accept it even if he did. Let it pass. After all
perhaps English jokes on fox hunting are better than Scotch jokes on death and
French jokes on sex.

There at least *Punch* stands high. It keeps clean away from that terrible
obsession of sex which is creeping like a green slime all over our imaginative
literature. Many of our so-called “best sellers” merely sell because they contain
every here and there a fine patch of dirt. The readers gather just as horse flies do
along the road where a well-fed horse has passed. In a later chapter of this book I
discuss the obsession over sex as one of the worst hindrances to the continuation
and cultivation of real humor. It is sufficient here to chronicle the fact that *Punch*
keeps absolutely free from it.

A peculiar form of the verbal technique of humor is seen in the combination known as the Irish Bull. This is not, like the pun, a deliberate and conscious trickery of words, but rather a peculiar and illogical form of thought—illogical, but at the same time absolutely expressing the meaning required. The essence of it is that, just as the pun must be impromptu, so the bull must be unconscious.

The Irish are a peculiar and a merry people. They lack the common sense of the English. They would rather be happy than solemn and can find merriment in a funeral and a comic element in poverty. Their tangled history and their perplexed relationships toward race, religion and patriotism, fill their national and personal life with a jumble of contradictions, of mixed allegiances and antipathies, loves and hatreds, ideals and actualities.

This seems to reflect itself in their manner of speaking and their form of thought that has under it the buried idiom of a language of a thousand years ago. It has been the fate of the Irish to fall under the domination of the English. The English imposed on them not only their government but, as far as they could, their religion and, with almost complete success, their language. A bright day is now dawning when a liberated Ireland will speak Gaelic or Erse or whatever they call it. Little children, with such names as Proinnsias o'h Aodhagain, which means Frank Aiken, in the nurseries of the Saortatt Eireann will read the *Tain Bo Cualnge* instead of "Jack the Giant Killer." But even under their enslavement to the English language the Irish have at least been able to rattle their chains. They spoke, and speak, it in their own way. They carry on a conspiracy against its grammar and its syntax. They refuse to begin a sentence with its subject; they start everything with "it." "It's your birthday it'll be this morning, Mistress Malony, and it's your health we'll be after drinking and all and all!"

In other words they take the English language and force it to express Irish thought. The result is that form of wording called the Irish Bull which, as some Irishman once boasted, "is able to give us the cream of wit, without losing any of the milk of human kindness."

Here are some examples of this cream, skimmed from the delightful collection of *Irish Bulls and Blunders* compiled by Mr. J. C. Percy:

"And where will ye find a house built in your own times that has lasted as long as wan of thim ould Norman castles," said a Waterford man in discussing Reginald's Tower with a visitor.

A lady writing to a friend with regard to a performance given in a

Dublin theater: "If you could only have been present you would have been sorry to have missed it."

A Hibernian philosopher once remarked that every man should love his native land, whether he was born there or not.

An Irishwoman who was recounting the troubles of her children said: "Lucky are the parents who have no children."

"On last Boxing Day some of the public-houses were closed and some remained open. This year it seems the very reverse is to be the case." (From an Irish paper.)

"If you had been here this morning to see the empty pews you would have been ashamed of yourselves for stopping away."

An order has been made that "the last carriage shall not be attached to railway trains, as it is always subject to unpleasant shocks and oscillation."

"For two pins I would kick your posterior in front of your face and not behind your back either," was the remark of an excited dock worker to a fellow-laborer with whom he had quarreled.

An Irish notice of reward for an escaped convict: "Age not known, but looks older than he is."

"When we get Home Rule everyone in Ireland will do as he likes, and those who don't will be made to do it," is taken from the speech of an Irish labor leader.

"The only thing to prevent what's past is to put a stop to it before it happens."

W. B. Yeats once told a reporter that he confidently looked forward to seeing the time when every educated man would understand Gaelic. Then he added that he was aware that it would take centuries to accomplish.

A policeman went up to a loafer in the street and ordered him to move on. "If everybody stood still like you are doing," he said, "there would be no room for folks to pass."

During a very wet day after a long spell of drought a farmer was heard to say to a friend in Tullamore fair: "An hour of this rain will do more good in five minutes than a month of it would do in a week at any other time."

"I asked the deceased before she became unconscious what caused her death, and she feebly replied—" (Taken from the depositions of a police constable in an assault case in which the victim afterward died.)

"I would give £50 to know the place I am going to die," said a son of Erin. "What good would that do you?" inquired his friend. "Lots," replied Pat; "because if I knew I would never go near the place."

Notice read out in church: "There will be a procession next Sunday afternoon in the grounds of the Monastery; but if it rains in the afternoon, the procession will take place in the morning."

In the days of the tall shako, a soldier came home on furlough and exhibited to his native village the hole made by the bullet that went through his headpiece. "Boys," said he, "ye see now what a good thing it is when ye're fighting to have a tall hat. Sure, if me hat hadn't been high, the shot would have gone through my head."

Notice in the office of an Irish business man: "Persons having no business in this office will please get through with it as soon as possible."

Irish newspaper: "A deaf man, named Taff, was run down by a passenger train and killed on Wednesday morning. He was injured in a similar way about a year ago."

When the form called an Irish Bull is used consciously and deliberately, for the sake of emphasis or fun, it is no longer to be thought of as a bull. It is then merely a form of wit. Thus it is related that an Irish political speaker in 1914, during the Irish crisis that preceded the war, declared that before Ulster could be coerced Mr.

Asquith would have to walk over thousands of corpses, *including his own*. This kind of thing is quite familiar as one of the modes of American wit. Compare Mark Twain's "reports of my death greatly exaggerated."

Very often an Irish Bull so called is merely a short cut to a very plain and unmistakable statement which it would take many words to express in a purely logical fashion.

Thus take the words of the Irishman refusing to volunteer in the Great War. "But if they'd take me by compulsion I'd go voluntarily." The meaning is quite plain. If the law compelled him to go, then he would submit and accept his fate quite cheerfully, but if it were left to his own choice he would not go.

The idea of Scottish humor is always falsely connected with funny stories about Scotchmen who come from Aberdeen and are very stingy. The national habit of thrift and avoidance of waste, things necessary to survival in a country as "stern and wild" as Caledonia, bred this parasitic joke generations ago. It still survives. Old jokes are easier than new ones, and there is a mental ease in repetition which avoids the pain of a new idea. Hence comes it that you will see two old cronies cracking the same joke with one another at every meeting, and preferring it for its very age. This is done just as people, growing old, read the same book over and over. "*Je ne lis plus,*" said some distinguished Frenchman of advancing years, "*je relis.*"

The stingy Scotchman serves as a familiar mold in which a joke is cast. Beside it, as already said, stand similar molds for casting jokes about the imaginary Irishman called Pat, and the universalized Negro called Sambo and a thing in a stovepipe hat and a bell-shaped coat understood to be a Frenchman.

But there is a real and typical Scottish humor that turns upon the Scottish natural character and outlook upon life. If one had to name it, it could be called Grim Humor. One or two examples will make the discussion of it easier. They are well-known stories and are used only for illustration, not for novelty.

A Scotchman's wife was taken ill and, seemingly, died. At her funeral as the coffin was being carried through the churchyard gate the pallbearers accidentally bumped it against a gate post. The shock resuscitated the woman. She was taken from the coffin and survived for many years. Then she was taken ill, and, this time, really died. At the funeral, as the coffin approached the churchyard gates, the bereaved husband said to the pallbearers, "Steady, lads, steady; dinna bump her."

Incidentally it is a neat and illustrative little problem in the theory of humor

whether in telling this story it would be better just to make the Scotchman say, “Steady, lads, steady”; and to leave out the “dinna bump her.” To put it in, makes the joke plain, but perhaps too plain—in short, obvious. This is a standing difficulty in all presentation of the humorous; and it is a standing defect in nearly all our art and literature that it has to be made obvious. The reason for it is that the great mass of it has got to be suited to ten cent audiences and tuppenny newspapers, to people without the full advantages of education and on the whole less able to appreciate a good thing than the more fortunate few.

There is a further reason in the technique of the moving picture and of the radio which has got to make sure that the thing “gets over,” all revision and restatement, or impromptu addition being impossible. It is a part of the huge price that we pay for the commercialization of art—a thing necessary but deplorable.

But take another illustration of Scottish Grim Humor.

A Scotchman’s wife was dying. Calling her husband to the bedside, she said, “John, I know you dinna like Aunt Janet but you’ll let her ride with you in the carriage to the funeral?”

The husband, much moved, answered, “I’ll do it for you, Maggie, but it’ll spoil my day.”

A technical question again. In real life, if such a thing could be real, the man would say, “It’ll spoil my day, but I’ll do it for you.” Why invert it? Because in actuality, if it really happened, his emphasis would be on his *resolution* and the phrase “I’ll do it for you,” would have the end place for emphasis sake. But in telling it as a funny story the emphasis is on the queer phrase and the queer meaning, “It’ll spoil my day.”

If there were such a thing as a freshman class in humor, they could be given a list of such misplaced phrases and sentences to be set right.

But to return to Scottish Grim Humor. The analysis of it runs thus: The Scotch are a people inured to a hard climate, a niggardly nature and a reluctant soil. This has helped to make them a stern and resolute people. They face facts. They don’t hide things. To them a spade is a spade, and a grave is a grave, and death is death. They walk beside it. So they talk as freely of a funeral as of a wedding. The setting of the stories above would be for other people too poignant—churchyards and whispered farewells, who could jest on that? But the Scotchman is not jesting about the churchyard. That is merely the place, the environment, he would as soon lay a funny story in a churchyard as in a barroom, beside a sickbed as beside a sideboard.

There is no irreverence involved.

At first sight this Grim Humor looks a little like the Primitive Humor of Destructiveness as seen above in Mr. Harry Graham's little Augustus. But in reality the two are absolutely distinct: little Augustus when he "pushes the feller underneath the bus," is an example of the sheer joy of destruction. There is nothing of this in the Grim Scotchman; he's not trying to hurt anybody.

A feature of so-called Scottish Humor is seen in the citations taken from the courts of law, and in particular the remarks made by the "hanging judges." The Scotch are as stern and matter-of-fact in dealing with capital punishment as with any other kind of death. They keep it free from sentimentality. Thus we are told that the famous, or infamous, Lord Braxfield, in sentencing a prisoner to death, said, "You're a very clever chiel, man, but ye wad be none the war of a hanging."

Still more brutal and pitiless is a remark attributed to Lord Kaines. He presided over the trial of one Matthew Hay—for murder, at Ayr—with whom he had formerly played chess. When the jury returned the verdict of "guilty," Kaines said, "That's checkmate for you, Matthew."

But let those find this humor who can. To most of us it is mere brutality. It lacks the element of kindness essential to real humor and passes into the hideous mockery into which humor may degenerate.

It is a peculiar element in Scottish humor, as appreciated by Scotsmen, that the harder it is to see, the better it is esteemed. If it is obvious, it is of less account. This rests on the intellectuality of the Scotch; having little else to cultivate, they cultivate the intellect. The export of brains came to be their chief item of commerce.

My distinguished friend Sir Andrew Macphail once wrote a novel of Puritan days, in which a Puritan sea captain has a warrant served on him and kicks the officers of the law off his deck. The passage runs:

"The ship-master tore the paper across and threw it in their faces. He fell into a passion: and declared that he hoped God would manifest his Works upon him if he allowed any King, save Him who made the sea, to come within his ship."

The inattentive reader may not notice that what the captain *really* said was that he would be blank, blank, b——d if he would allow any son of a b——, and so forth.

The point of the humor lies in the analogy between pious exhortation and powerful swearing, and in the fact that the joke requires careful concentration to see

it.

It would be fruitless to try to discuss here the exquisite humor of modern France, at its height with Alphonse Daudet. *Tartarin de Tarascon* is unsurpassed as a creation, and the chronicle of his deeds unsurpassed in execution. But humor defies translation. Turn it literally from language to language and it becomes like Mark Twain's frog and the Portuguese Grammar. Turn it any other way and that merely turns French humor into English humor, just as Fitzgerald turned Omar Khayyam's Persian couplets into English thought. When he was done there was nothing particularly Persian about them.

CHAPTER IX

HUMOR THROUGH THE AGES

The Greek Idea of Fun—Chaucer Sets a High Mark in Dirty Stories—
Shakespeare and Falstaff—The Soothing Influence of Tobacco—Roast Beef and
Rule Britannia.

This chapter, on the historical developments of humor, is appended only for scholars; and they won't read it. Scholars write, but they don't read. They talk but they don't listen. Anyone who has lived among them knows that.

The ancients may have been very funny fellows. But I don't think so. I am not referring here to the capacity to laugh. That is nothing. Primitive races often laugh easily. The Negroes can laugh more, and at less, than any other living race, with the South Sea Islanders as a fair second. But humor as art, in writing and drawing, is another thing.

Man's earliest writings were probably names, dates, inscriptions, epitaphs and such. The first real forms of literature were the sacred books. One looks in vain for conscious humor in them. Mark Twain, indeed, after having visited Damascus, claimed that there was at least *one* joke in the Bible, when it talks of "the street (in Damascus) which is *called* straight." Others have found what looks like a real joke arising out of the use of italics in the Bible to indicate a word that is inserted or understood. Such is the statement: "And he said, 'Saddle me the ass.' and they saddled *him*." There is a similar appearance of a joke in the text "They gave him to eat, and he *did* eat."

Such a sanctity still envelops the literature of Greece and Rome that it requires a certain hardihood to say anything derogatory to it. Classical scholars find a majestic humor in Homer and a brilliant wit in the plays of Aristophanes. But it is hard for the rest of us, if we tell the truth, to see it. Homer is about as funny as "Jack and the Bean Stalk"; the Homeric laughter of the Gods would fit in nicely with "Jack the Giant Killer," and the Algonquin Indians would find it just right.

The Greeks cultivated a lot of little short witticisms—parent forms of the newspaper "joke" of today.

Thus:

"A peasant having heard that parrots live for a hundred years bought

one to see if it was true.”

A peasant wishing to see if his horse could live without food, stopped feeding him; after a time the horse died. “Alas,” said the peasant, “just as he was learning to live without food he died.”

In these little Greek stories the “peasant” is usually the butt, the easy mark. He takes the place of the “commercial traveler” in certain anecdotes of today.

The most famous reputation is that of Aristophanes, the comic dramatist. But for us today the cloud of notes and explanations that have to go with his jokes obscures the sight. His play of *The Frogs* was first produced at Athens in the year 405 B. C. It obtained the first prize in a public competition. The reader can judge of the vast distance that separates us from the humor of the ancient Athenians by reading over the first scene of the play with notes by a Cambridge scholar. The dialogue is supposed to take place as between Dionysus, a god, but disguised as Hercules, and his slave Xanthias. The scene is laid outside Hercules’ house. When they come on the stage, Xanthias is riding on a donkey and carrying an immense pile of luggage on a porter’s pole.

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Xanthias. (Looking round at his burden with a groan.) Shall I say one of the regular things that people in a theater always laugh at?

Note 1. Shall I say? or “Am I to say,” deliberative subjunctive mood.

Note 2. Aristophanes is here laughing at the stale artifices of the comedians who tried to raise laughter by constantly introducing overloaded slaves who groaned and grumbled.

Dionysus. Say what you like except, “I’m overloaded.” But mind, not that. That’s simply wormwood to me.

Xanthias. (Disappointed.) Not anything funny?

Dionysus. Not, “Oh my poor blisters?”

Xanthias. Oh! my poor old neck. Blistered all round and I mustn’t say its blistered! Because that’s funny!

Dionysus. Airs and Insolence! When I, Dionysus, child of the Great Jug, must work and walk, and have him ride lest he should tire himself.

Note 3. Dionysus uses an unexpected word. We expect him to call himself the “child of the Gods” instead of which he calls himself the “child of the Great Jug.” This kind of joke is common with Aristophanes and is called a “paraprosdox.”

There! most readers would drop out at about there, and replace the little book on the shelf of the library with a sigh. The Cambridge scholar may have expected Dionysus to call himself the “child of the Gods”; we didn’t. We had no idea what he was going to call himself. The “paraprosdox” never touched us.

But after all this is not really fair to the Greeks. We cannot understand their jokes without a lot of explanation on the side as to the manners and customs and events out of which the joke arose. But they knew all that already; hence, for them, there was no painful apparatus of explanation. The joke was instantaneous and apparent.

Turn the thing around the other way. Let us suppose that the Greeks had lived after us instead of before us, and had to read and explain with footnotes our *Punch* and our Mark Twain and our comic strips and Negro dialogues. The effect would probably be as tedious as the explanations of Aristophanes are to us.

Take one of Mark Twain’s typical jokes, put it into Greek and out again with footnotes. Here is one of the best remembered and most characteristic, taken from a volume of his collected sketches. It purports to be an item of telegraphic news of the day and reads:

Elephant escaped from circus today. Chased two plumbers. Killed one.
The other escaped. General regret.

Now we don’t need any explanation as to what a circus was, and what a plumber did, and why there was general regret. We get it all at once. But the Greek reader has to have it all doled out to him with notes. Thus “Elephant escaped from circus.” Note 1. The elephant, or *elephas*, was still seen in the days of Marcus Twainos in connection with a circus, or traveling arena of wild beasts and men. Similar escapes of elephants are recorded by Diodorus Siculus and Edgar Wallace. Note 2. Plumbers—not connected with *plumbago*,—were a class of highly skilled artisans who were in secret possession of the art or mystery of putting washers (see under *wash*) on kitchen *taps* (look under *sink*). Hence an imaginary regret at the death of a plumber becomes an amusing form of aposiopesis. The learned commentator Eudidulus finds an entirely different meaning. He tells us that a “plumber” was a song bird and gives to the passage an amorous interpretation.

Or let us take a simple example from the accumulated wisdom of *Mr. Punch*:

Punch's advice to those about to marry—*DON'T*.

Greek note. The text here seems hopelessly corrupt. If, on the one hand, the people about to marry, don't marry, then clearly they were not about to marry. On the other hand if they don't marry, then no one marries, since also those not about to marry, don't marry. It is possible that something is missing to complete the passage, such as, "don't hesitate to do so," "don't delay any longer." This not only makes excellent sense, but is characterized by that pungent wit which distinguished the England of Queen Victoria. Compare as parallel passages "Rock me to sleep, mother," and "Sing a song of sixpence."

In other words, translation of humor from one language to another, from one age to another, from one thought to another, is almost impossible. The effects at which the verbal technique of humor depends are lost in the process. The Greeks might have been a terribly funny people and we wouldn't have known it. Yet as far as we can or dare judge, their standard of humor was pretty primitive and clumsy. Nor did their heavy and cumbrous language lend itself to the subtleties of speech as do the broken-up and reconstructed languages of the modern world. This of course is, to a classical scholar, rank ignorant heresy. The classical scholars have kept alive the tradition of the superiority of ancient languages—a kaleidoscopic mass of suffixes and prefixes, supposed to represent an infinite shading of meaning. It is a character that they share with the Ojibway and the Zulu languages and such. Effects of far higher complexity and delicacy are possible where language is put together with separate words. Compare the English "Gin a body meet a body coming through the rye," with the corresponding Greek which has only three words in it. "Let-it-be-taken-as-a-hypothesis—two-people-coming together each with the other—by-or-in-or-from-a-field of or with rye."

The same difficulty runs through all the consideration of Latin, and medieval and Arabic humor of the past. It has to be looked at through dim glass. We cannot truly see it. But we can feel sure that, to our bright intelligences, it was not very funny.

After the Greeks and the Romans came the Middle Ages with monks and theologians, troubadours and minstrels as all that there was of literature. It was not

an age of letters, still less of humor. The fatter and the jollier of the monks are said to have told one another very funny stories—there being no ladies present—but they didn't write them down. When they took up their pens they were dreary enough; the nearest they could get to fun was a Latin anagram or acrostic, or some such pedantic word puzzle.

But most people—even the ladies and gentlemen—couldn't read and write; and if they could, there were practically no books. Hence tales, heroic, or narrative or humorous, had to be told or sung not read; and hence the demand for singers who could carry the lines in their head—improvise them when they fell short—and strum some sort of music with them. These people—troubadours, jongleurs (jugglers) and minstrels—wandered about among the castles, singing for their supper. The art of printing presently killed them, though they long survived in odd places. Walter Scott chronicled the lay of the last of them. Yet their ultimate descendant the organ-grinder still survives.

The minstrels flourished best as the troubadours of Provence. We are told—in the histories of literature—that they carried their art to a high pitch of excellence. Their language was the half-way form of Latin breaking up into Italian, French, Spanish and Portuguese. They sang of chivalry and of love. People who couldn't hear or read a historic, heroic story any other way sat enraptured listening to the troubadour.

We can only appreciate it by thinking ourselves back into the past. To us, now, it would be intolerable. Imagine listening to the news about Mr. Roosevelt and the New Deal given to us in this form:

The feast is o'er in Roosevelt's bower
And the Wizard has gone to his White House tower.
His intellect, serene and bold,
Dreams of demonetizing gold.
Then, summoning an office boy,
He calls for fifteen grains of troy.
Thus in his own mysterious way
Does he concoct the N.R.A.

But the medieval lady sitting in a flood of silk, with her golden head on the steel shoulder of a knight, took in her literature that way. After all, as compared with English "*Course No. 9, Medieval Literature*" as given in a modern college, it is not so bad.

But love was the chief theme. At that time and place love had run to seed: it had drifted into silly gallantries, and make-believes, the occupation of the idle hours of people who couldn't fight or eat all the time, wouldn't work, despised trade, couldn't think and had nothing to smoke. Hence the silly gatherings, and the Courts of Love, with a code of laws to guide the true love of true lovers, and mock trials and sentences awarded against erring and recreant lovers. The ladies of Provence married kings and princes and carried with them to their new homes their troubadours and jugglers and their Courts of Love.

One of the best known codes was that of the Countess of Champagne (1181-1197 A. D.). It contained in all thirty-one articles. Articles 20, 23 and 30 explain how a true lover should behave himself.

- Art. 20. The true lover is always timid.
- " 23. Filled with thoughts of love the true lover eats less, and (presently) still less.
- " 30. Without intermission the true lover is filled all the time with the image of his lady love.

It would be difficult to see where such a true lover would find a place in the modern world. Few people would care to give him forty cents an hour.

But for humor in all these centuries of song and love, one looks almost in vain. Scholarly historians, holding a brief for the past as scholarly historians always do, tell us that the troubadours were terrible satirists. "Their satire," says one of their admiring expositors, "was as terrible to the ladies of Provence as was that of Archilochus to the Greeks." But that probably only means that, if they wanted to, they could tell some pretty raw stuff on anybody. Sometimes, as in the *Chanson de Roland*, humor is represented by mountainous exaggeration. But this is primitive. It reappears in children's nursery stories. When children read Hans Andersen's story of the tinder box and hear of the treasure guarded by a dog with "eyes as big as the round tower of Copenhagen," they shudder and snigger with mingled fear and laughter. So it was with medieval romance. That is as far as it had got. As beside the reach and range of modern humor, it is nowhere. Yet in a way this humor of exaggeration lives long. The nineteenth century still had it, even before the Americans revived it. Sydney Smith once said of a fat lady of his acquaintance, "I was once rash enough to try walking round her but only got half way."

Nor need one pause overlong to consider the humor of the English Chaucer

whose name comes at the close of this period. He died, perhaps, in the year 1400—and perhaps not. Chaucer has come in for those enduring laurels of praise with which the academic world loves to crown its own initiators of the past. “Like Shakespeare, it would be difficult,” says one of Chaucer’s admirers, “to decide in which style lay Chaucer’s great power—the humorous or the pathetic.” Yet this same critic adds, “It is to be regretted that his tales of the former cast should be almost without exception either positively nasty or unjustifiably licentious. Yet they are related with a spirit, vivacity and ease that have never been surpassed.”

Quite so. In other words he told dirty stories well. So did Abraham Lincoln. He lived in a dirty age of a filth and indecency not known to us now, and to us, if we could see it, no more attractive than a bad smell or a rotten carcass. Chaucer had, for his time, neat and charming tricks of language. But to what extent his humor is humor, to us, is an open question. Yet such is our revering affection for the dawn of our literature, like our own wistful recollections of our childhood, that we resent what seem any cheap and easy affectations of superiority.

The humorous effect, such as it is, rests upon what one of the commentators calls “the delightful gravity with which the animals are invested with intellectual endowments.” In other words it turns on the very primitive incongruity or contrast between animals being animals and yet being able to speak and talking in a very dignified way. Such as it is, the Frenchman La Fontaine, the fable writer of the seventeenth century, did it better still: for he added to it turns of thought with deeper meaning: as thus:

An old wolf lay, reflecting, in his lair—
For what else can you do in a lair if you don’t reflect in it?

After Chaucer came printing, and the early dawn of our literature turned to the full sunrise of the Elizabethan age. There is no doubt of the greatness of this. Bacon and Shakespeare stand as far ahead of the singers and dirty story tellers of the Middle Ages as they do above the Algonquin Indians. Think of such sublime lines as the speech of Macbeth:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.”

There is a majesty and wonder in the language and the thought never excelled and seldom equaled. A troubadour would have written: “Methought I was a candle and yblowed meself out.”

So, too, Bacon in his marvelous essays of which the words and sentences linger unforgotten.

“What is truth,” said Jesting Pilot, and would not stay for an answer.

But humor? For most of the readers of Shakespeare and for most of the audience at a Shakespearean drama the “humor” does not get very far, or receives only an admiration of esteem. One admits, of course, Falstaff as one of the great humorous creations, as modern or as modernizable, as when written. And Falstaff is enriched by Shakespeare’s marvelous power of language. Compare the scene (*Henry IV*, Part II) when Falstaff and Prince Hal are discussing the “dressing-down” that the Prince is going to get from his father—and rehearse it in advance, Falstaff assuming the rôle of the King. He proceeds to blame the young prince—in the character of his father—for the bad company he keeps; yet admits that there is one exception.

“And yet,” he says, “there is a virtuous man whom I have often noted in thy company, but I know not his name.”

Prince. What manner of man, an it like your majesty?

Falstaff. A goodly, portly man, i’ faith, and a corpulent, of cheerful look, a pleasing and a most noble carriage; and, as I think, his age some fifty, or, by’r lady, including to threescore; and now I remember me, his name is Falstaff: if that man should be lewdly given, he deceiveth me; for, Harry, I see virtue in his looks. If, then, the tree may be known by the

fruit, as the fruit by the tree, then peremptorily I speak it, there is virtue in that Falstaff: him keep with, the rest banish. . . .

It is the custom to decry the English literature of the eighteenth century. Shakespeare and Milton being dead, the century offered no names of equal eminence. It is customary to compare the “artificiality” of Pope’s verse and thought with the sincerity of those who preceded him. It may be so. It is a matter for scholars to wrangle over. It is said that there are in the United States schools over two million colored scholars alone. Let them fight it out.

But in point of humor the eighteenth century represents a great advance. Its changing conditions of human life made for a newer temper—a new kindliness of human thought. The earlier generations had been rude. Two centuries before, people lived in houses without glass windows, swilled thin sour beer for breakfast, quarreled over theology and burned one another alive for heresy. Quiet, intellectual life had no chance. Now things were different. Tobacco had come, and coffee and tea. People smoked long pipes on the benches of coffee houses and learned to talk and write of nothing in particular, whereas Milton needed all Hell to write about.

As the result of the new age we see the appearance of the *Spectator* and the *Tatler*. Many things written by Addison and Steele would have been fit for *Punch*. Laurence Sterne could write on a dead mule and Oliver Goldsmith on a deserted village. The age carried with it an increasing kindliness. The new indifference called religious tolerance was spreading rapidly. Without this broad and kindly outlook humor is not possible. We see it in the pages of Laurence Sterne—the unforgettable Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim—and in the charm that envelops the *Vicar of Wakefield*. This humor was on a high ground—the humor of the contrasted lights and shadows of character, and not the mere incongruity of words. But for the most part the humor of the eighteenth century tended to get swamped out in the effusions of militant nationalism. Here begins the “roast-beef, blue-water, Rule Britannia” school. Consider as illustrative Jemmy Thomson’s insulting “Rule Britannia”:

The nations not so blest as thee,
Shall one by one to tyrants fall,
While thou shalt flourish great and free
The dread and envy of them all.
Rule Britannia! Britannia rule the waves.
Britons n-e-e-e-ver will be slaves.

In such a noise as this it was hard for humor to be heard; or to think in such a stuffy atmosphere as is wafted by the following:

When mighty roast beef was the Englishman's food
It ennobled our hearts and enriched our blood.
Our soldiers were brave and our courtiers were good.
O! the roast beef of Old England.
And O! for Old England's roast beef!

There is indigestion in every line of it. Or think of humor trying to survive along with such intense national hatred as that expressed in Fielding's verse:

With lantern jaws and meagre cut
See how the half-starved Frenchmen strut
And call us English dogs!
But we'll soon teach these English foes
That beef and beer give heavier blows
Than soups and roasted frogs.

A special outcome of such national pride was the new humor of the navy—the supposedly rough, roaring, rollicking fun of the one-eyed bosun and the lower deck and the bum-boat woman. Tobias Smollett chiefly developed it. Captain Marryat, who could have done better, copied it and modified it. Gilbert and Sullivan later on gently and kindly chloroformed and buried it with *Captain Reece* and *Pinafore* and *Dead-Eyed Dick*. Looking back on it, it looks pretty raw. Here's a typical piece of Smollett, taken out of *Roderick Random*:

We had not been many minutes engaged [in a sea-fight] when one of the sailors brought another on his back to the cock-pit where he tossed him down like a bag of oats and, pulling out his pouch, put a large chew of tobacco in his mouth, without speaking a word.

Morgan [the Welsh ship's doctor] examined the condition of the wounded man and cried out, "As I shall answer now the man is as tead as my great grandfather." "Dead," said his comrade, "he may be dead now, for aught I know, but I'll be damned if he was not alive when I took him up." So saying, he was about to return to his quarters, when I bade him carry the body along with him and throw it over board. "D——n the body!" said he. "I think 'tis fair enough that I take care of my own." My fellow mate [Morgan] snatching up the amputation knife, pursued him half

way up the cock-pit ladder crying, “You lousy rascal, is this the churchyard or the charnel house or the sepulchre or the Golgotha of the ship?”

Hearty stuff, isn't it? Roaring fun: real old English—and there are pages and pages of it.

So the eighteenth century drew to its end in a generation of wars and thunder. After that was all over, England woke to a new sunshine and its literature in the next two generations moves upward to the crowning splendors of the Victorian age.

Thus rose humor, from the trivialities of the “Ancients,” the indecencies of Chaucer, through the great Elizabethan and on past the smiles of Addison and the tears of Sterne and Goldsmith, through the crepitudinous mouthings of Smollett to the open sunlight of the nineteenth century.

CHAPTER X

THIS VERY MINUTE

The World Today—The Coming Man—Snarls for Smiles—Our Damaged World—The Tyranny of the Lower Class—Sex-Stuff—The Brighter Side—A Galaxy of Present-day Humorists—The Cartoon and the Column.

Turn now to talk of humor in the world of today, of this very minute. What are we to think of it? Is it progressing—moving forward or backward or sideways? There is no doubt, sideways.

Let us see first all that can be said against the present outlook, and gather up all that is mean and unfavorable to it. This is in accordance with the best writing of today, the “grouch” writing which alone is popular. We like to hear the bad about everything, not the good. A biography of today shows us not what a hero a man was, but how far from it he was. It shows that Washington was not really American at all but practically an English squire; that Pitt didn’t say as his last words “My country, how I leave my country!” but “Is there another pork pie?”; and that St. Thomas Aquinas was a terrible fellow to run after the girls.

That’s the kind of stuff that makes good reading.

So with humor: to express the situation in Irish, the more you think of its future, the less you think of it. In the first place, is it likely that the man of the future will be a more humorous sort of being than the man of today? Most unlikely. Already from our scientific knowledge we can pretty well foresee his further physical evolution. There seems no doubt, that—from his everlastingly sitting in a motor car—his body will grow longer and longer, and his legs shorter and shorter. Men with short legs can get out quicker and hence will survive.

Future man therefore will be shaped like a frog, with short, wobbly legs, a little backside and long powerful arms. His arms will be bent a little hoop-shaped to fit his steering wheel. His eyes will be set much more sideways than now, so that he can cross a street and look sideways both ways at once. His eyes also, like those of a frog, will have double lids so that he can flip them open and shut in a split second. This is for looking at games, contests, marathons, and high speed championships. The little fellow is a great spectator. You can’t get by him.

He will have practically no hair on his head and a scalp like rubber, with large fluted ears pendulous and quivering, to sort out noises with, and to scoop in aerial radio as it goes by. But very often he will have on his radio-flaps right over his ears.

It seems to me already, as I sit among my friends in my club, that they look

pretty much like this. A rough Victorian with a beard would seem like a bear among them. Out of doors these future people would look a little queer to us because of the folded parachutes strapped to them (ready for a lift in a gyro at any minute), and the shock-absorbers they wear over their backsides. In these coming days all fevers and germ diseases will have gone long ago. People will die only from accidents in motor cars, from being run over, or carelessly falling out of a gyro. Hence the need of quick sight, double eyelids, quivering ears and an acquired indifference to seeing other people run over. Seated beside this leather man will be his leather wife. You can easily distinguish her by her larger paunch and the double size of her shock absorber. The little girls will be as beautiful as kittens at twelve years old and all leather at forty.

Now what about the brain of the little leather man? Oh, quick as lightning, in fact quicker. He has to be, or he'd get killed or fall off his house. He grasps any remark before you end it, and sees a joke the minute you start it. But he can't hold anything—no sustained attention. You've got to keep on *surprising* him or his brain flags and won't work. His newspapers are made of headings only, and mostly he gets his news through his ear-flaps. He doesn't read much, because he can fix in little radio books to talk to his ear-plugs. He can look at books only if they have pictures, queer pictures all distorted out of the actual. But he never reads alone; he can't bear to be *alone*. It frightens him. He has to turn-on something to relieve him.

And what about his amusement, his laughter? In his places of entertainment they will shoot a deluge of pattern jokes at him at lightning speed and the little fellow chuckles like a tickled frog. Then without an instant's pause, they souse him into pathos till water rises in his eyes. He'll stand about an eighth of an inch. Beyond that he'd get surly, so they shift in a split second and crack the world's news at him. For him everything has to be quick and snappy. The "fun" he prefers consists of "wise-cracks," short snappy sayings, with a snarl in them. He likes a snarl better than a smile; indeed he's an ill-conditioned creature at bottom. He could have no possible time for long-drawn humor, for prepared effects; it must all come fast and go quick; and with it distorted pictures, blurred and confused, grotesque transformations, things not physically possible, physically monstrous, a world of delirium. The little creature has outworn his own planet; he's clutching out into other space, other dimensions.

This is, one admits, not exactly a picture of the future. Much of it is here today. Anyone who can see with older eyes can see it so. Much of our humor now—dare one say, especially in America?—is over-rapid, snarling, and ill-tempered. It is used to "show things up," a vehicle of denunciation, not of pleasure.

So with our picture drawing. Much of it in our illustrated papers is being overwhelmed in distortion, in freakishness, a crazed attempt at novelty. Much of it—not all of it. The American political cartoon is as preëminent as ever in its wit and execution. The American “column” writing still towers upward—but of that later. Let us stick to all the bad stuff first.

This rapid, snappy little man of the future is the inevitable outcome of a rapid age. The world goes too fast for humor, perhaps too fast for art. It has no time for reflection. Already that is being done by special reflectors who write whole books of reflections which are then read over in a few minutes by people who never reflect. Or they are thrown on the screen by a moving picture which can easily run off fifty years in fifteen seconds.

The moving picture and the radio are getting in their work upon us. We cannot tell where it will end. “We live,” writes one of our greatest living authors, “in a badly damaged world. It is a world of flickering shadows tossed by electric currents, of a babel of voices on the harassed air, a world of inconceivable rapidity, of instantaneous effects, of sudden laughter and momentary tragedy, where every sensation is made and electrocuted in a second and passes into oblivion. It is a world in which nothing lasts.”

On the other hand the moving picture, it cannot be denied, has wonderful physical possibilities for the creation of the comic. Its power of transformation is, literally, magical. It can turn anything into anything at a moment’s notice. Hence all the huge flying phantasmagorias in which weird animals in the semblance of mingled mice, rabbits and cats chase one another over the globe, fly over icebergs, rise, fall, explode, come apart and join again—anything! But the very power cancels itself. Sheer iteration robs it of its power to hold attention. Tired children yawn at its miracles.

One looks back with something like pity to the “transformation scenes” of the old-fashioned theater before movies existed—the darkened stage, the heavy swearing heard behind the wings, the groaning scenery, the flapping curtain—and then up went the gas! as lo! the Robbers’ Cave had turned into the Fairy Palace! But of course, only once a night—and not once every five seconds.

Still greater is the potentiality for humor of the slow motion picture—in which we see action going on and life moving in split seconds. An athlete, leaping over a high bar, rises gently into the air, floats over the bar, and slowly, painfully slowly, gets down to the earth again. This is wonderful. But oddly enough the people who run—

or ran—the moving pictures were so slow in comprehension that they put these things on first as serious studies in optics. Only when the audiences broke into laughter did they realize that the thing was funny. Even at that, the slow motion picture has never, as far as I know—and I probably know nothing—been properly exploited for its comic power. Think of an angry quarrel in which one man smashes another’s nose done in this fashion—the gentle approach of the fist, the quiet contact, and the kindly pressure on the nose.

One could imagine a whole drama done in “slow,” a story, that is, which in actual life would last five minutes and would run in “slow” for an hour. One could use a short quick tragedy, a love scene culminating in a murder. Done already? No doubt. But there ought to be not one, but legions of such presentations. With the scene should connect talk and dialogue that move at the ordinary pace and not in time with the slow; the man punching the other’s nose inch by inch could talk to him quite fast and angrily as he did it. In the murder scene the power to make running asides would be simply wonderful.

No doubt it has all been done or, if not, it has been left aside because the people who control moving pictures decide that the moving picture audience would not care for it. For there it is. The moving picture is not art; it is commerce. It was born in sin, born to make money, and it carries with it the marks of its parentage. It makes art its servant. But even its most magnificent effects, its most artistic presentation is hampered and hindered by the fact that it is there to make money.

It is not a true art because it cannot be conceived in the brain of the individual artist and executed by him. Consider the difference. Poetry is a true art. The poet needs only words and paper; not even that, since poetry is older than writing. He doesn’t even need a listener. He can talk to the waves or the woods. And in its origin poetry had nothing to do with money—even now mighty little.

Take drawing. Giotto only needed a little stick and the sand to draw his round O upon. A painter conceives a picture and makes it. A composer conceives a piece of music and makes it.

But the moving picture! If you or I conceive one, what a vast intervention of other minds and other hands, of physical apparatus and technical considerations—and then, overwhelmingly, the sheer utter dominance of the commercial motive. We can write a poem and then see if it will sell; draw a picture and see if anyone will buy it—and if not, can hug to our hearts the bitter consolation of art for art’s sake. But the moving picture! Before we can make it at all the “salesmen” must decide that it will sell, that it will please the public.

Please the public! That’s the trouble today not only with the moving picture but

with everything that is written to be printed or acted, everything drawn, sung, or depicted. Nothing can appear unless there's money in it. Poetry and drawing and painting could keep alive, but such things as moving pictures, radio programmes and syndicated newspaper stuff can live only if people will pay for them. And not only some people but practically all the people. It is the ten-cent crowd that are needed, not the plutocrats. Hence has been set up in our time an unconscious tyranny of the lower class. The snobbishness of the term may pass without apology in view of the truth of the fact. In spite of all we might wish, there is still such a thing as a lower class—people who have not had the education, the home advantages, the travel and the culture that have come to the more fortunate. And it is the wishes and likings of the mass which largely dictate what the rest of us shall see and hear. More and more the stage, the screen and the press succumb to this temptation. Now and then and here and there it is possible to present something over which a professor and a plough boy, a servant girl and a sorority sister may laugh and cry together. But not often. To a great extent, moving pictures and newspaper fun and radio talk have got to be made cheap enough for the cheapest, silly enough for the silliest and obvious enough for the dullest. Hence the unnatural overemphasis and overacting—partly to overcome the physical medium; hence the breaking down of those principles of consistency of character, unity of conception and so on which used to seem the necessary conditions under which alone art could exist.

To this tyranny of the lower class add the tyranny of the moralist and the tyranny of the advertiser. Take as an example the peculiar limitations which impose themselves on anyone wishing to sell humorous writing to syndicated newspapers. Grant, of course, that in wishing to *sell* at all, the writer becomes commercial too; he ought, like the poet, to go out and crack his jokes to the waves and the woods and let the squirrels have a laugh. Yet at least he has a certain instinct for creation.

But creation, when syndicated, must be strictly confined. The writer must say nothing about religion, either for or against; nothing about prohibition (though *that* ban is now lifted); nothing about women, as they really are. "Syndicated" women have to conform to types—such as college girls, chewing gum and doing Algebra, and calling the President "Prexie." In reality college girls don't chew gum, have forgotten algebra and call the President Dr. Smith, not Prexie.

Nor can a writer in syndicated humor say anything for or against labor or capitalism or for or against Republicans or Democrats; nor anything for or against companies or trusts or against rubber or soap or oil or any great product; nor reflect on any class such as farmers or dentists or undertakers; nor make any reference to

the next world or to spiritualism.

It is amazing that artists and writers can comply with such requirements. They can do it only by sticking to a range of childish and innocuous topics. They may, for example, make huge fun of Mr. Boob, who can't get his furnace to work; Mr. Nutt, half drowned by his own garden hose; and Mr. and Mrs. Snarl, who never stop fighting. From this stuff and similar stuff in the "movies" one gets an impression as if the whole of us were being flattened back into childishness.

But even when one has talked of these impediments to the progress of humor—this over rapidity and over vapidness—the greatest remains still. This is the growing obsession of our time with "sex-stuff"—the very antithesis of wholesome humor, corroding it like an acid. All over the surface of our current literature, mostly in our fiction, there is spreading a nasty green slime of sex-stuff.

Those of us who were brought up half a century ago in the wholesome days of the eighties and the nineties, are probably more aware of the existence of this noxious atmosphere than those being raised on it.

It may very likely be that this outbreak of sex-obsession came as one of the unforeseen by-products of the emancipation of women. In the old Victorian days, now passing out of memory, women had quite a different place from what they have now. The men did everything and ran everything, and women represented just the ornamental side of life and the household side. They were given a sort of general commission as angels, fairies, grandmothers and such, and with that the men kept them pretty well secluded. They never got out without a chaperon and a book of rules. It wasn't quite as complete as the Turkish system but it was nearly as good.

The only serious job given over to women was that of the care of the sick. They didn't really know anything about it—had never seen a clinical thermometer—but they filled the sick room with flowers (carbonic acid gas) and sat and did needlework beside the bed. It wasn't bad. People often got well. Such was their province.

O woman! in our hours of ease, (*so sang the poet*)
Uncertain, coy, and hard to please,
When pain and anguish wring the brow
A ministering angel thou!

To be coy all day, uncertain all evening, and an angel in the night of illness, such was the function of women. Men did all the work and all the thinking, ran all the professions, made all the money.

Then things began to change. Women began to get educated, to break into the colleges, to vote, to carry on professions. Everybody knows all that. It wouldn't have mattered so much if the ornamental stuff had dropped off with it; women dressed like ash barrels would have sat on committees with men in overalls. But instead of that there arose all the new "sex-stuff" that has transformed the world since the days of the early nineties that some of us still remember as the days of our youth.

It is hard to say how it began—probably with little things. Somebody, let us say, put a girl's face on the outside of a magazine instead of the good old Latin Mottoes and pictures of the Capitol at Washington that used to be there. Now the girl's face has spread everywhere. In any magazine stand you will see a whole display of them—huge, pink faces with yearning eyes, and blubbering lips, or long, close, furtive eyes that are meant to stand for mystery. From the magazines the girl's face—emblem of the present sex-enslavement—spread everywhere. A grocery firm want to order a Christmas calendar for their customers. What design do they put on it—a ham, a cheese, a bologna sausage? That's what they used to put in the early nineties, and a skilled artist of those days could combine those three things with a charm that made your mouth water. But now, oh no! Just a great girl's face—or at most a girl's face eating a bologna sausage and saying "*How do you like my Bologna?*"

They put girl's faces now on calendars, on book jackets, on posters and placards; next year they are going on bills, invoices and government blue books. The girl and the girl's face have passed into a national emblem—Miss America, Miss California, Miss Patagonia. In the early nineties, when we wanted to see a critical competition, something with real life in it, we used to go and see a prize hog show. Anyone from the other side of the Mississippi, or any Englishman north of the Ouse, could stand and look at a fat hog all day; just as a Scotchman would look at a terrier or a man from Kentucky look at a horse. But now they all stand and gop at "Miss America," and "Miss Ireland." Even the Japs held a show last year to pick out Miss Yokohama.

Think of it! What has become of all the old national types? John Bull—turned into Miss Brighton. Uncle Sam—he's now 48 misses. Where are the Russian Bear, and the British Bulldog and the American Eagle—the symbols of our former manliness? All turned into girls and flopping little flags.

The worst of it is that presently people began inventing a new set of words to go along with the new sex-stuff. The biggest and most successful was "sex-appeal." No one heard of anything of that sort in the early nineties. But all the Miss Americas are

supposed to have it; and the men and all the women go round looking for it. This “sex-appeal”—whatever the nasty thing is—is now supposed to be quite a qualification. Men who have it would feel flattered to be told about it. In my time back in the early nineties it would sound like telling a man that he had a skunk tied to him. Now it is quite different. I imagine that people now-a-days would get a job on the strength of it or would lose a job for want of it. I can well believe that the letter bags of today would contain such correspondence as the following:

You will be sorry to hear that my husband has lost his job in the flour and feed business. He had held it for seventeen years and they hated to let him go. But the general manager explained that he hadn't enough “sex-appeal” for the business. He needed more “pep.”

Now-a-days when the flour and feed firms all sell “vigoro” and “humpo” and mash for laying hens, a man has to have “pep” and “sex-appeal” to deal with the customers.

Or this—*Letter from the manager of the North South East and West Railway to a junior clerk:*

Dear Mr. Smith,

We are sorry to have to drop you from the staff of our uptown ticket office. But the fact is that you have not sufficient “sex-appeal.” Our lady customers like something silkier and oilier than you are. We have debated whether we could oil you up a little but fear it is impossible.

Please do not ask us for a job in the freight department as a truck driver, as the case there is stronger still. You haven't the chest for it.

All of this sex-appeal stuff—having got started on this digression, I hate to leave it—was enormously accelerated by the fact of women breaking into men's games. They not only broke into them but they spoiled them. Lawn tennis came first. They got into that from the start. Back in the eighties and nineties we didn't look on lawn tennis as *a game* in the real sense. It was just a sissy business on a lawn, played with girls as part of a social afternoon. The real games were football and lacrosse, baseball and cricket. Nobody played tennis well or wanted to; those of us who were six and a half feet high could beat the rest of us. It was just a matter of height.

Then came golf. In the early nineties no one played golf except a few fluffy old Scotchmen in plaids and tartans, wholesome-looking old men who looked like an

advertisement for whiskey. We used to notice them knocking a little ball round the landscape, with a flask in their pocket. We didn't understand that it was a game; we thought it was just their way of drinking whiskey. At their age they couldn't stand up at a bar and drink it as we did. They needed air with it. They could hold more.

Then began the transformation of golf. It moved out of the parks and the sheep pastures, laid out vast links, built palaces and let in women. Now it is all women. Look at any golf links of today—the bright autumn landscape and the pleasant greens all spoiled by a bunch of tubby-looking women, all over the place. Can they play? Of course not. A few of them seem able to hit the ball, but not really. Any of us who played real games in the early nineties could have gone on the ground and licked them off it. But they got there and started their sex-appeal stuff, and the men went all to pieces; began dressing themselves up in silk golf shirts, imported tartan ties and silly plus-fours shaped like a pair of baby's pants.

So of course lots of women can beat them. Look at any two of these men walking round the links with their soft new clothes and their heads prematurely bald as eggshells. All men are bald now. It's the price they pay for being so much with women. In the nineties we always presumed that a bald man either was a professor or had lived too fast a life, and was a little silly over women. Now they are all a little silly over women, so they all get bald.

But the new games did worse than that. They served to help along the foolish idea that men and women could be "comrades." I always hate that word, especially when it is pronounced "*Kumrads*," with a silly, soapy, mock-manly intonation. When I hear a man say, "I have many 'Kumrads' among women who are just real pals and chums," I think I know where to class him.

Back in the nineties we didn't look on women as comrades. We looked on them as a dangerous drug. You had to be mighty careful and keep away from them all you could. They were in their place for certain times and occasions—for evening parties and dances. But for daily, hourly intercourse as comrades! No, thank you, we didn't want to get bald.

Of course in the eighties and nineties every young man presently "got crazy" over a girl—we had exactly the right name for it. He got engaged to her and went round with her all the time, flooping round in a canoe under shadowed river banks. But we understood it. The man was just knocked out for the time being. Presently he would either marry the girl or she would "throw him over." Anyway he'd be all right later. Some night he'd be back in the bar again with his foot on the rail—cured.

Those days seem long ago. Since then the women have taken over one half of man's world, and keep the whole of their own. Man's sense of humor—his

distinctive attribute—has to survive as best it can in this new atmosphere.

Someone may object here that this sex-stuff is no new thing, and that in the domain of humor dirty jokes are as old as the history of laughter. But that is quite another thing. Dirty jokes are all right when the humor is strong enough and clear enough to wash away the dirt. I know a lot of them like that. But I will not set them down here. Some people might not realize how superior they are.

A dirty joke, in other words, is all right when the joke redeems the dirt. Nothing is more wholesome to the eye than a group of men roaring in concert after an after-dinner joke. No editor would print it, though any editor would enjoy it. Very different is the slimy stuff that all, nearly all, editors and publishers look for to make magazines circulate and turn a stupid book into a “best seller.”

Now all that has gone above, as to the outlook for humor, represents things that are going to happen and are even here and there beginning to happen, but not things that have happened yet. These are just the clouds on the horizon. For the present the sky is bright enough. Apart from the world eminence of a Dickens or a Mark Twain—a thing that happens once in centuries—there are as good humorists in the world today as there ever were—perhaps better.

Of those in England I have spoken enough already. Let me pay a willing tribute to those in America. It is not possible in a book of this sort to attempt a list of classified, and stratified, humorists. That kind of thing is always impossible and is more invidious in what it leaves out than flattering in what it puts in. But it seems to me that, taken as a group, the American humorists of today are far and away ahead of the humorists of preceding times—not ahead of such eminent genius as that of Dickens and Mark Twain and Alphonse Daudet, taken singly, but standing collectively at a higher level than those of the past.

Shall I mention such names as Irvin Cobb and Robert Benchley? No, I will not. It is better taste not to name them. But if I *did* name them, I wouldn't mind saying that I consider Irvin Cobb a far funnier man than Shakespeare. If the word “funny” sounds too comic, I will put it as a far more “humorous” man than Shakespeare. I think Shakespeare himself would have admitted this. He would have said, “Cobb, it marvels me how thou dost it!” Scholars will say this marks me as an ignoramus. Very good, in that case so I am; and so is Cobb; and so is Shakespeare.

Similarly, Aristophanes would have admitted the superiority of Bob Benchley to himself, or wished he had had the same chance of being born two thousand five hundred years later. One can imagine Aristophanes saying to Euripides, “Listen,

Euripides, just a minute, if you know how, this is Benchley's latest in the *Athenike Salpinx*; get this."

In spite of all that can be said about the hurry-scurry of the age, the degradation of art to please the mass, the substitution of snarls for smiles and the widespread smear of sex, there are great humorists in America. I have mentioned two of them. *J'en passe des meilleurs*—I leave out some of the best as a bygone Frenchman once said. Here is Harry Leon Wilson, with his priceless Ruggles, and Donald Ogden Stewart and George Chappell, on either of whom Aristophanes has nothing and Herodotus still less. Christopher Morley can be as funny as he likes when he wants to be and remain just as wise. What my criticisms above are meant to mean is simply this:—will there ever be such men as these again? Mr. Gellett Burgess told me some time ago that he doubted it very much; and I have heard Croy and Cuppy and Nunnally Johnson say the same thing. What is more, these men are away ahead of the generation of the Josh Billingses and the Bill Nyes in that they are educated men. Benchley even claims to have been at Harvard, and Ellis Parker Butler, I believe, was put out of several colleges, all first-class ones.

Nor is it only in the domain of writing that American humor still maintains its eminence. In comic and humorous drawing the ravages effected by crazy and meaningless distortions have not covered the whole field.

The American political cartoons have, so far, escaped this deterioration into meaningless distortion and still hold their own. They use, and always have, not the literal method of drawing things as they are, described above in connection with *Punch*, but employ the typical American method of exaggeration. This is a quite different thing from the freakishness for freakishness' sake of the burlesque illustrations. Exaggeration can have significance in every line of it. But the cartoons excel not so much in the art of the drawing as in the extraordinary cleverness of fancy which goes to their creation.

It is of course impossible to convey this without the drawings themselves. But all are familiar with the huge bloated figures, often covered with dollar marks to represent "capital," and the poor little midgets labeled with such names as "The Common People," "The Tax Payer," etc.

Beside the distinctive excellence of the American political cartoon one may place the similar distinction of the American "column," a thing equaled nowhere else. The little columns, full of odd comment under such titles as a "Line o' Type or Two," "The Conning Tower," "It Seems to Me," and "Good Morning," have grown up as one of the happiest and wholesomest developments of our time. To say who started it is like

guessing at Homer's birthplace. But certainly Bert Taylor—the B. L. T. of the “Line o’ Type” of the *Chicago Tribune*, whose name is still held in affectionate memory, was one of the pioneers, along with Franklin P. Adams of the “Conning Tower.” “Good Morning” is the salutation of Malcolm Bingay in the *Detroit Free Press*, and “It Seems to Me” means that it seems to Heywood Broun. One can hardly hope to quote or reproduce this column work in single samples. But it stands as one of the bright outstanding features of our current American humor of the day.

But if one may venture to display a brick as a sample of a house, or a thread as a sample of a coat, perhaps the following quotations from some of the writers just named will be in point.

“The Church cannot be holy on Sunday and worldly on Monday,” says Bishop Freeman, of Washington. Bishop, you’d be surprised.

M.B.

One of those Earnest Minds writes me a circular letter wanting to know what 10 books I would enjoy reading most. Ten that I have not read.

M.B.

Minneapolis reports a seven pound baby born to a 48 pound midget. Just a block off the old chip.

M.B.

Of course, the people could go and mine their own coal, and we suppose an elephant might raise his own peanuts.

D.M.

Poetry is not what a poet creates. It is what creates poets.

D.M.

The one good thing about me is my opinion about myself.

E.W.H.

A gasoline war, now that prices are rising, is said to be imminent. Ho! for the stormy petrol!

F.P.A.

CHAPTER XI

EPILOGUE: FROM THE RIDICULOUS TO THE SUBLIME

As has been said several times above, humor, in its highest form, no longer excites our laughter, no longer appeals to our comic sense, no longer depends upon the aid of wit.

We have recalled the picture of little Huckleberry Finn floating down the Mississippi on his raft or discussing with his Nigger Jim the mysteries of the Universe. We have seen the poor debtors of Dickens's debtors' prison, with their broken lives, their pots of porter, their tawdry merriment, their pitiable dignity and their unutterable despair. Such pictures as these call forth a saddened smile of compassion for our human lot; it all seems so long past, so far in retrospect, that the pain is gone.

Such is the highest humor. It represents an outlook upon life, a retrospect as it were, in which the fever and fret of our earthly lot is contrasted with its shortcomings, its lost illusions and its inevitable end. The fiercest anger cools; the bitterest of hate sleeps in the churchyard; and over it all there spread Time's ivy and Time's roses, preserving nothing but what is fair to look upon.

Hence comes into being the peculiar legend of the "good old times of the past." Each age sees the ones that preceded it through a mellow haze of retrospect; each looks back to the good old days of our forefathers. In England, people turn back affectionately, and always have, to the days when "England was England"; they can still hear the sound of the village church bells across four centuries of distance. They talk of "Merrie England," and of the Roast Beef of Old England, forgetting that England is older now.

Seen through this refracting prism of past distance all the harsh outlines are blurred and softened, the colors mingle to a mellow richness. Beside it, all the people and things about us at the moment seem crude and hard. The dead are better companions than the living.

Each of us in life is a prisoner. The past offers us, as it were a door of escape. We are set and bound in our confined lot. Outside, somewhere, is eternity; outside, somewhere, is infinity. We seek to reach into it and the pictured past seems to afford to us an outlet of escape. When we read of the past, all the pain is out of it; so may we sit buried in some old book of battles long ago, of kings who rose and fell, of multitudes that died of plagues and were swept away in floods. How quaint and sweet sounds now the Plague of London! What terror then; what rumbling of the carts of death passing in the night! But now, what a charm to read of it in the

enchanted pages of an Evelyn or a Pepys.

Such too is that escape by the inner absorption of the mind in something utterly unconnected with the pains, the pleasures, the profit and the work of life. Here, for those who can enter it, is the door of the higher mathematics—the comic sections of the Greeks, purposeless and without bearing for them on any art or occupation, but of what infinity of interest. I have often thought that for those absorbed in recondite studies, life must be peaceful indeed. But it is not so. The rapture of isolation is only caught and lost. I used to think, for example, that there must be a wondrous stillness and serenity in the life of a comparative philologist; I thought so till I knew one—a bygone colleague. I realized, as I got to know him that for him life was all storm and stress—the Annual Philological Congress to attend, each one seeming to crowd on the heels of the last; the preparation of “papers,” as terrific to him as the manufacture of nitroglycerin. He witnessed and fought all through the great revolution against the Anglo-Saxonization of English spelling, helped to drive out the legend of an Aryan prototype of Sanskrit, and, as his biggest achievement, lived to put the pluperfect subjunctive practically where it is now.

Through all this life and storm he came and went about the college abstracted, muttering, practically unknown; yet to himself a storm center of seething action.

I saw his queer little funeral—the littlest I ever saw—go past the college gates in a snowstorm. A medical student on the steps lit his pipe and asked, “What the Hell’s that?” and when they told him—“I never heard of him,” he said. Yet the man had been with us thirty years.

Escape is barred. And yet we look around forward and backward to find it; nor anywhere more eagerly than backward, to those wistful and haunting recollections of our childhood, that search for a vanishing identity connecting us with eternity but lost in the mist of the infinite. How much of our poetry carries the illumination of that retrospect toward childhood, colored once with the hues of the morning and now changing to those of the fall of night.

I remember, I remember, the house where I was born!

Why should that haunt us? We ought to think, “Certainly I do; it was No. 7 John St.” So shall we sing:

*When you and I were young, Maggie,
And all the world was green
And every lad a King, Maggie,
And every lass a queen! . . .*

What a preposterous statement, if we take it on its face; only the Royal Family of Roumania living in the green mountains could live up to it.

All through such recollections, all through such sentiments, runs the strain of the highest humor, like gold in the bed of a stream. Here belong our recollections of our school days, never recalled without a pleasant smile for even the worst of our sufferings, a laugh for our simplest adventures.

The other day upon the street I stopped a distinguished friend of mine, a dignified colonel, well up in the sixties, and I said: "Reg, I must tell you. A week or so ago, in Pittsburgh I ran across Eph Lyon."

"Eph Lyon!" he said, brought up all standing with the sudden interest of it! If I had said, "The other day I saw the King of Siam," my old schoolmate would have merely said, "Did you?" but here he stood in the snowflakes, repeating, "Eph Lyon! Eph Lyon! Why, let me see, I haven't seen Eph Lyon for—what!—fifty years."

"Fifty," I said. "That's right, you and I and Eph were all at the school together fifty years ago."

"Eph," said the colonel, standing fixed in his tracks with the snow falling round him—if he had any business he'd quite forgotten it—"Eph was the best half back on the football team."

"Quarter back," I said.

"Half," he protested.

"No," I said, "Gib Gordon was half."

"Why, of course," he admitted. "Gib Gordon! certainly Gib Gordon! Do you remember the day when Beer Ryckert tried to smash his face in?"

And we both laughed, thinking of that angry quarrel in the football field of fifty years ago—all past and vanished but the "humor" of it.

Hear how people talk who have known one another as children and who come together again in later life, and laugh over the angers and quarrels of their childhood.

"Do you remember that day when I took away your doll and you cried so?"

"Yes, and do you remember I simply got furious and scratched you across the face?"

They both laugh at the recollection.

"Yes, and then your Aunt Mary came in and sent you home and put

me in the cupboard.”

“Shall I ever forget my rage in that awful dark cupboard?”

So it would seem to me if departed spirits later on would talk and hold converse about their previous lives—far behind them—they would talk as we talk of childhood happenings. The angers, the misfortunes, even the crimes would have faded into happy recollection, into divine retrospect, into “humor.”

“Do you remember,” thus speaks one of the dead, “the night you broke into my house and my brother and I heard you in the cellar and came down with a gun?” “Do I remember?” laughs the other. “Say, was I scared? I sat there in the coal fumbling with my darned old automatic and then just by luck I got a fair crack at your brother—and just then in hopped the police, you remember?”

They both laughed at the thought of it. “And the trial, do you remember the trial, wasn’t it simply killing?” More laughter. “Yes, and the day you were hanged, eh? Say, I’ll never forget it. Well, they were great old days!”

If, as the poet Rostand saw it, the armies of the dead still ride and flaunt over the night sky above the battle fields of Europe, there will be no sternness in their faces, no martial anger left.

They would be like the cherished picture of the Duke of Wellington and Marshal Soult riding in London in a carriage together in the eighteen forties, or like the aged men from the North and the South who in 1913 walked over again the ground of Pickett’s Charge of fifty years before at Gettysburg, laughing and mumbling of the fierce fight at the Stone Wall. Thus may the dead be standing, side by side, about their cenotaphs of today, talking together, nation with nation, ally with enemy, in a language which the living have not yet learned to use.

Thus does life, if we look at it from sufficient distance, dissolve itself into “humor.” Seen through an indefinite vista it ends in a smile. In this, if what the scientists tell us is true, it only offers a parallel to what must ultimately happen to the physical universe in which it exists. Matter, we are told, is not matter in the real or solid sense. It is only a manifestation of force or energy, seeking to come to rest. An atom is not an atom in the sense of being a particle or thing. It is just an area inside whose vast empty dimensions unmatched forces, stresses and strains are trying to come together and neutralize one another. When they do this—at some

inconceivable distance of time—then the universe ends, finishes; there is nothing left of it but nothingness. With it goes out in extinction all that was thought of as matter, and with that all the framework of time and space that held it, and the conscious life that matched it. All ends with a cancellation of forces and comes to nothing; and our universe ends thus with one vast, silent, unappreciated joke.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

Inconsistency in accents has been fixed.

Breaks in the original book used one of three formats: a short centered line; a line of dots; or vertical spacing. It isn't obvious when one was used versus another, for example you could have dots or a line or nothing between stanzas of a poem. The dots have been reproduced where perhaps there was some significance, but mostly a horizontal line has been used.

[The end of *Humor: Its Theory and Technique* by Stephen Leacock]