

*The Lecturer at  
Large*

Stephen Leacock

Illustrated by

C. W. Jefferys

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*Title:* The Lecturer at Large

*Date of first publication:* 1919

*Author:* Stephen Leacock (1869-1944)

*Illustrator:* C. W. Jefferys (1869-1951)

*Date first posted:* Aug. 29, 2023

*Date last updated:* Aug. 29, 2023

Faded Page eBook #20230855

This eBook was produced by: John Routh & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <https://www.pgdpCanada.net>

# *The* LECTURER AT LARGE

A Few Painful Reminiscences of the Platform

*By* STEPHEN LEACOCK

*Author of "Sunshine Sketches of a Small Town," etc.*

ILLUSTRATED BY C. W. JEFFERYS

**I**t has been my lot to speak and to lecture in all sorts of places, under all sorts of circumstances and before all sorts of audiences. I say this not in boastfulness, but in sorrow. Indeed I only mention it to establish the fact that when I talk of lecturers and speakers, I talk of what I know.

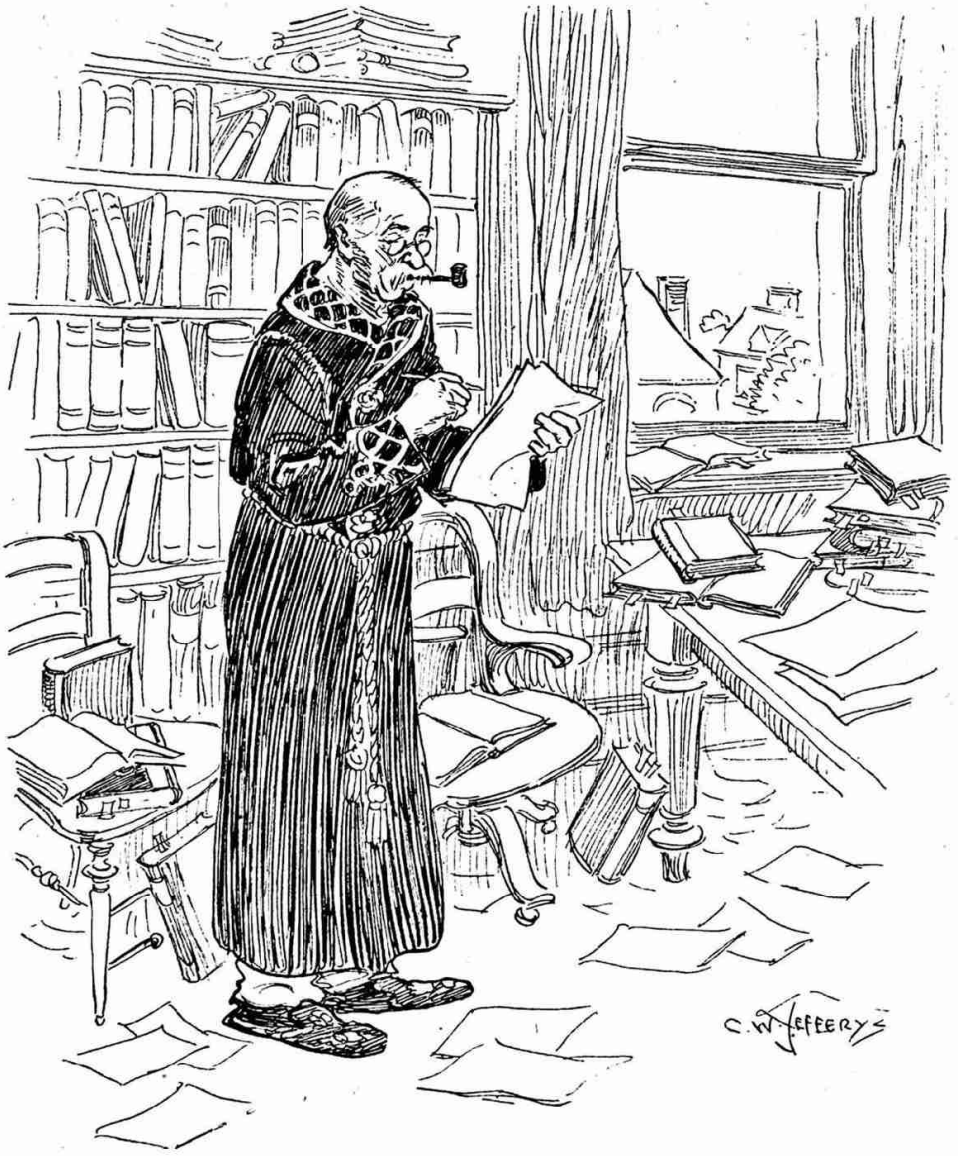
Few people realize how arduous and how disagreeable public lecturing is. The public see the lecturer step out onto the platform in his little white waistcoat and his long tailed coat and with a false air of a conjurer about him, and they think him happy. After about ten minutes of his talk, they are tired of him. Most people tire of a lecture in ten minutes; clever people can do it in five. Sensible people never go to lectures at all. But the people who do go to a lecture and who get tired of it, presently hold it as a sort of grudge against the lecturer personally. In reality his sufferings are worse than theirs. In fact the whole business of being a public lecturer is one long variation of boredom and fatigue.

So I propose to set down here some of the many trials which the lecturer has to bear.

The first of the troubles which anyone who begins giving public lectures meets at the very outset is the fact that the audience won't come to hear him.

## The Society That Won't Turn Out

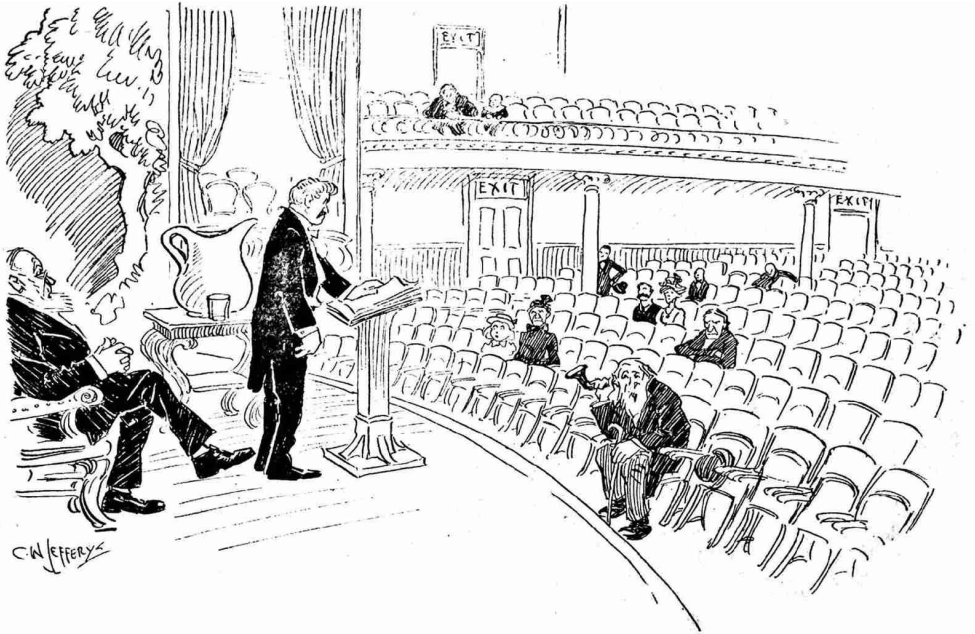
**T**his happens invariably and constantly, and not through any fault or shortcoming of the speaker.



*Upstairs working at his lecture.*

The city in which I live, and I suppose for the matter of that, all Canadian cities, is overrun with little societies, clubs and associations, always wanting to be addressed. So at least it is in appearance. In reality the societies are chiefly composed of presidents, secretaries, and officials, who want the conspicuousness of office, a few members who hope to succeed to office, and a large list of other members who won't come to the meetings.

For such an association, the invited speaker carefully prepares his lecture on “*Indo-Germanic Factors in the Current of History*.” If he is a professor, he takes all winter at it. You may drop in at his house at any time and his wife will tell you that he is upstairs “working at his lecture.” If he comes down at all it is in carpet slippers and dressing gown.



*A huge gathering of keen people with Indo-Germanic faces.*

His mental vision of his meeting is that of a huge gathering of keen people with Indo-Germanic faces, hanging upon every word.

### The Meeting of the Owl's Club

**T**hen comes the fated night. There are seventeen people present. The lecturer refuses to count them. He refers to them afterwards as “about a hundred.” To this group he reads his paper on Indo-Germanic Factors. It takes him two hours. When he is over the chairman invites discussion. There is *no* discussion. The audience is willing to let the Indo-Germanic factors go unchallenged. Then the chairman makes this speech. He says:

“I am very sorry indeed that we should have had such a very poor ‘turn out’ to-night. I am sure that the members who were not here have missed a real treat in the delightful paper that we have listened to. I want to assure the lecturer that if he will come to the Owl's Club *again* we can guarantee him

next time a capacity audience. And will any members, please, who haven't paid their dollar this winter, pay it either to me or to Mr. Sibley as they pass out."

I have heard this speech (in the years when I had to listen to it) so many times that I know it by heart. I have made the acquaintance of the Owl's Club under so many names that I recognize it at once. I am aware that its members refuse to turn out in cold weather; that they do not turn out in wet weather; that when the weather is really fine, it is impossible to get them together; that the slightest counter attraction—a hockey match, a sacred concert—goes to their heads at once.

There was a time when I was the newly appointed occupant of a college chair and had to address the Owl's Club. It is a penalty that all new professors pay: and the Owls batten upon them like bats. It is one of the compensations of age that I am free of the Owl's Club forever. But in the days when I still had to address them I used to take it out of the Owls in a speech, delivered, in imagination only and not out loud, to the assembled meeting of seventeen Owls, after the chairman had made his concluding remarks. It ran as follows:

"Gentlemen—if you *are* such, which I doubt. I realize that the paper that I have read on '*Was Hegel a Deist?*' has been an error, I spent all the winter on it and now I realize that not one of you pups know who Hegel was or what a Deist is. Never mind. It is over now, and I am glad. But just let me say *this*, only this, which won't keep you a minute. Your Chairman has been good enough to say that if I come again you will get together a capacity audience to hear me. Let me tell you that if your society waits for its next meeting till I come to address you again, you will wait indeed. In fact, gentlemen,—I say it very frankly,—it will be in another world."

### An Ideal Chairman

**B**ut pass over the audience. Suppose there is a *real* audience, and suppose them all duly gathered together. Then it becomes the business of that evil-minded villain—facetiously referred to in the newspaper reports as the genial chairman—to put the lecturer to the bad. In nine cases out of ten he can do so. Some chairmen, indeed, develop a great gift for it.

Here are one or two actual samples from my own experience:



*"We are trying the experiment of cheaper talent."*

"Gentlemen," said the chairman of a society in a little village town in Western Ontario, to which I had come as a paid (a very humbly paid) lecturer, "we have with us to-night a gentleman" (here he made an attempt to read my name on a card, failed to read it, and put the card back in his pocket)—"a gentleman who is to lecture to us on" (here he looked at his card again) "on Ancient—Ancient—I don't very well see what it is—Ancient—Britain? Thank you, on Ancient Britain. Now, this is the first of our series of lectures for this winter. The last series, as you all know, was not a success. In fact, we came out at the end of the year with a deficit. So this

year we are starting a new line and we're trying the experiment of *cheaper talent*."

Here the chairman gracefully waved his hand toward me and there was a certain amount of applause. "Before I sit down," the chairman added, "I'd like to say that I am sorry to see such a poor turn-out to-night and to ask any of the members who haven't paid their dollar, to pay it either to me or to Mr. Wallace, as they pass out."

Let anybody who knows by experience the discomfiture of coming out before an audience on any terms, judge how it feels to crawl out in front of them labelled *Cheaper Talent*.

### Letters of Regret

**A**nother charming way in which the chairman endeavors to put forth the speaker of the evening, and the audience into an entirely good humor, is by reading out letters of regret from persons unable to be present. This, of course, is only for grand occasions when the speaker has been invited to come under very special auspices. It was my fate, not long ago, to "appear" (this is the correct word to use in this connection) in this capacity when I was going about Canada trying to raise some money for the relief of the Belgians. I travelled in great glory with a pass on the Canadian Pacific Railway (not since extended; officials of the road kindly note this) and was most kindly entertained wherever I went.

It was, therefore, the business of the chairman at such meetings as these to try and put a special distinction or cachet on the gathering. This is how it was done:

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the chairman, rising from his seat on the platform with a little bundle of papers in his hand, "before I introduce the speaker of the evening, I have one or two items that I want to read to you." Here he rustles his paper and there is a deep hush in the hall while he selects one.

"We had hoped to have with us to-night Sir Robert Borden, the Prime Minister of this Dominion. I have just received a wire from Sir Robert in which he says that he will not be able to be here."

Great applause.

Presently the chairman puts up his hand for silence, picks up another telegram and continues:



“Our committee, ladies and gentlemen, telegraphed an invitation to Sir Wilfrid Laurier very cordially inviting him to be with us to-night. I have here Sir Wilfrid’s answer in which he says that he will not be able to be with us.”

Renewed applause.

The chairman again puts his hand up for silence and goes on, picking up one document after the other. “The Minister of Finance regrets that he will be unable to come” (applause)—“Mr. Rodolphe Lemieux—(applause) will not be here (great applause)—the Mayor of Toronto (applause) is detained on business (wild applause)—the Anglican Bishop of the Diocese (applause)—the Principal of the University College, Toronto (great applause)—the Minister of Education (applause)—none of them are coming.” Great clapping of hands and enthusiasm, after which the meeting is called to order with a very distinct and palpable feeling that it is one of the most distinguished audiences ever gathered in the hall.

### Humor Under Difficulties

**H**ere is another experience of the same period while I was pursuing the same exalted purpose:

I arrived in a little town in Eastern Ontario, and found to my horror that I was billed to “appear” *in a church*. I was to give readings from my works and my books are supposed to be of a humorous character. A church hardly seemed to be the right place to get funny in. I explained my difficulty to the pastor of the church, a very solemn-looking man. He nodded his head, slowly and gravely, as he grasped my difficulty. “I see,” he said, “I see, but I think I can introduce you to our people in such a way as to make that all right.”

When the time came, he led me up on to the pulpit platform of the church, just beside and below the pulpit itself, with a reading desk with a big bible and a shaded light beside it. It was a big church, and the audience, sitting in half darkness, as is customary during a sermon, reached away back into the gloom. The place was packed full and absolutely silent.



*“The Lord will forgive anyone who laughs at the professor.”*

Then the chairman spoke:

“Dear friends,” he said, “I want you to understand that to-night it will be all right to laugh. Let me hear you laugh heartily, laugh right out, just as much as ever you want to. Because,”—and here his voice assumed the deep sepulchral tone of the preacher, “when we think of the noble object for which the professor appears to-night, we may be assured that the Lord will forgive anyone who laughs at the professor.”

I am sorry to say, however, that none of the audience, even with the plenary absolution in advance, were inclined to take a chance upon it.

#### The Chairman With the Afterthought

**I**recall in this same connection the chairman of a meeting at Burlington, Vermont. He represented the type of chairman who turns up so late at the

meeting that the committee in charge have no time to explain to him properly what the meeting is about, or who the speaker is. I noticed on this occasion that he introduced me very guardedly by name (from a little card) and said nothing about the Belgians, and nothing about my being (supposed to be) a humorist.

This last was a great error. The audience for want of guidance remained very silent and decorous, and well behaved during my talk. Then, somehow, at the end, while somebody was moving thanks, the chairman discovered his error. So he tried to make it good. Just as the audience were getting up to put on their wraps, he rose and knocked on his desk and said:

“Just a minute, please, ladies and gentlemen, just a minute. I have just found out—I should have known it sooner, but I was late in coming to this meeting—that the speaker who has just addressed you has done so in behalf of the Belgian Relief Fund. I understand that he is a well-known Canadian humorist (ha! ha!) and I am sure that we have all been immensely amused (ha! ha!). He is giving his delightful talks (ha! ha!) though I didn’t know this till just this minute—for the Belgian Relief Fund, and he is giving his services for nothing. I am sure when we realize this, we shall all feel that it has been well worth while to come. I am only sorry that we didn’t have a better turn-out to-night. But I can assure the speaker that if he will come to Burlington *again*, we shall guarantee him a capacity audience. And may I say, that if there are any members of this association who have not paid their dollar this season, they can give it either to myself or to Mr. Whittan, as they pass out.”

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Lecturer at Large* by Stephen Leacock]