

*Humor  
and  
Humanity*

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HUMOR *and*  
HUMANITY

*An Introduction to the Study  
of Humor*

BY  
STEPHEN LEACOCK

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## PREFACE

The author has given to this book the title *Humor and Humanity*, rather than the obvious and simple title *Humor*, in order to emphasize his opinion that the essence of humor is human kindliness. It is this element in humor which has grown from primitive beginnings to higher forms: which lends to humor the character of a leading factor in human progress, and which is destined still further to enhance its utility to mankind.

STEPHEN LEACOCK.

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*Chapter I*  
*ON THE NATURE OF HUMOR*

Humor may be defined as the kindly contemplation of the incongruities of life, and the artistic expression thereof. This definition may be compared (to its advantage) with the famous dictum of Immanuel Kant that the ludicrous is “an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing.” Kant’s idea seems to go off with a pop and vanish. Even Henri Bergson’s assertion that “the comic is something mechanical encrusted upon the living,” would leave some readers unsatisfied. Aristotle said that what is laughable is merely a subdivision of what is ugly, involving some defect that is not connected with pain or injury. Aristotle only said this as a casual remark in his *Poetics*, but it contains the essential element which the word *kindly* in the definition is meant to convey.

In any case it is difficult to make a definition of humor, or of wit or of the ludicrous, or any cognate terms, short enough for easy understanding, without leaving out important considerations. Thus humor, quite obviously, may mean either the expression in art (words, or pictures, or pantomime) of the incongruities of life, or the sense in us which enables us to express it. We can talk of a *book of humor*, or of the *humor* of the man who wrote it. As Kant would say, if we let him, the word is either objective or subjective. But the essence of the definition lies in the word ‘kindly,’ and the central theme in the present work is to show the development of this aspect of humor from ruder and more primitive beginnings to the higher reach and the deeper significance which it has now attained. But before we can come to that there is much ground to be traversed.

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With honorable exceptions, books on humor are written by people who haven’t any. The work is left to writers on philosophy and psychology, and it is amazing how dull scientific people can be when they try. It is a tradition that they must not be bright. Our language is replete with the buried metaphors of such words as ‘depth,’ and ‘profundity’ and ‘weight,’ as terms of praise; and ‘superficiality,’ ‘lightness,’ etc., as terms of disparagement. They do not correspond to fact. The surface is the best thing to see. A lark sees more of the surface of the earth than the earthworm. For a broad view of anything we ought to need a ‘superficial’ man. In this way we talk of a ‘weighty argument,’ as if argument should be as heavy as a bag of cement, whereas in reality good argument should be as light as a high explosive.

Written over the portals of the library of a certain great university is the legend “LEARNING MAKETH A FULL MAN.” It seems a very stodgy conception. It ought to

make him light as air, able to hop like a humming bird among the flowers of scholarship. But popular fancy will not have it so. The scholar must be heavy, and full and dull, and the public will take him at his own estimate. Such a conception is seen in the heavy ‘doctors of divinity’ of the eighteenth century, to whom the poet Jemmy Thompson was referring when he described a “doctor of tremendous paunch, awful and deep, a black abyss of drink.” These men had replaced the lean ascetic scholarship of the monasteries, and had been left side-tracked when the newer men moved to the newer things, mathematics and natural science. To the yokels and squires about them they seemed ponderous and profound with unspoken thought. In reality they were probably too full in the evening and too sleepy in the morning either to say or to think a great deal. But they have left their mark upon our literature and our traditions in the cult of dullness which obsesses us. Learning should be bright and luminous, as cheerful as Sydney Smith, as optimistic as Leonardo da Vinci: gloom, like that of Carlyle, mostly means indigestion.

So, too, it has come about that even our laughter is decried. When the poet talked of the “loud laugh that spoke the vacant mind,” he meant to express approval—a mind free from care. But popular interpretation shifted the word vacant to mean idiotic. ‘Idle laughter’ is contrasted with ‘profound reflection,’ as if it were better to be puzzled than to be happy, to look inwards instead of outwards. When Gratiano says, “Let me play the fool!” his auditors think, “Certainly, you’re just the man fit for it.” Compare also, “Alas poor Yorick! I knew him well, a fellow of infinite jest”: but Yorick is dead, and death covers all our faults. Fellows of infinite jest, when alive, are rated low.

Many people recall Oliver Wendell Holmes’s saying, so often quoted that it is always new: “The clown knows very well that the women are not in love with him but with Hamlet, the fellow in the black cloak and plumed hat. The wit knows that his place is at the tail of the procession.”

There was in the United States, in the days of Abraham Lincoln, a bygone Senator called Corwin—affectionately and for everybody—Tom Corwin. He was a great man and he knew it. He had the intellect and the energy and the goodwill to lead a nation: and he was aware of it. But the world didn’t know it, because Tom Corwin was always full of fun and valued a joke and a laugh more than solemn silence. Sometime before his end he left to the world the legacy of his leading thought. “The world,” he said, “has a contempt for the man who amuses it. You must be solemn, solemn as an ass. All the great monuments on earth have been erected over the graves of solemn asses.”

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What we are saying, then, is that people who sit down to write books on humor are scientific people, philosophical analysers who feel that they must make something serious, something real out of it, and show us that humor can, in the proper hands, be made as dull and as respectable as philology or epistemology.

Hence the elaborate analysis and the elaborate definitions and distinctions. One contemporary writer, for example, has a whole book to elucidate what ‘nonsense’ is and how to distinguish what is nonsensical from what is ‘ludicrous,’ or ‘ridiculous’ or ‘absurd’ or ‘funny’ or ‘comical.’ All these words run so closely together, with shades of meaning at once so obvious and so impalpable, like the blending colors of the rainbow, that it is as unprofitable as it is futile to try to reduce their meanings to a contrasted scheme of gradations. When Euclid says, “Which is absurd,” he doesn’t mean us to break into a roar of laughter. Is a ridiculous thing the same as a comical thing? It doesn’t matter. To what extent is a ‘funny’ man also a ‘witty’ man? Perhaps he is, and perhaps he isn’t. Is ‘ludicrous’ the same as ‘laughable’? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. One modern analyst of humor has a whole chapter on the “varieties of the laughable,” distinguishing twelve main divisions with three or four subdivisions of each. It appears that you can make a man laugh in about forty different ways, including tickling his ribs, telling him a dirty story, or informing him very suddenly that his wife has eloped.

The opinion may be ventured that such attempts at intensive classification and analysis are out of place. It is characteristic of the psychology of the hour, and of its application to literary criticism, that it tries to emulate the exact quantitative methods of natural science with results worse than useless. You cannot weigh an argument in a balance, measure social forces with a slide rule, and resolve humor with a spectroscope.

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Most writers, despairing of a satisfactory condensed definition of humor, fall back on the origin of the word itself. Beginning, then, in this plain way, we may say that humor, in point of etymology, is an elusive word that has come twisting down the centuries and through the languages. As a Latin word it meant simply *wetness*, a meaning still found in our *humid* and *humidity*. But ‘wetness’ took on a special meaning in connection with the medical theories and practice of Hippocrates and his successors and so ‘humour’ came to mean the liquid currents flowing through the human body. On these four humours—the blood, the phlegm, the yellow bile and the black bile—depended all of man’s health and vitality: the humours passed from their ‘crude’ state through ‘coction’ and ‘crisis’ and ‘expulsion’—things only dimly intelligible to the polite mind. If all went well, the man was in health; if not, disease

appeared. The man was then in an ‘ill-humour,’ or ‘out of humour.’ The physician’s task was to help nature to keep the man in ‘good humour.’ But later on, in the Middle Ages, people had forgotten all about Hippocrates, and the word ‘humour’ shifted into a general meaning of ‘disposition,’ ‘temperament.’ The medical idea was out of it. This is the way in which we mostly find it used by Shakespeare’s characters. “You’ll ask me,” says Shylock to the Duke of Venice, “why I rather choose to have a weight of carrion flesh than to receive three thousand ducats? I’ll not answer that, but say, *it is my humour.*”

From this usage it was easy for the word to branch off in either of two contrasted directions. ‘Humour’ could be used to mean ‘caprice,’ ‘whim,’ ‘wilfulness’; or it could be used to imply something rather odd, or exceptional or incongruous. It was this last meaning which presently vanquished and overcame all others, giving us our modern word humor, which grew at length to imply not merely incongruity but something pleasing and amusingly incongruous. But the word only settled down to this meaning in recent times. In the days between those of Shakespeare and the Victorian age the word still ran a wider gamut of meaning. Dr. Johnson in his famous *Lexicon* of 1755 gave a list of nine definitions of humor running all the way from ‘moisture’ through ‘temper’ and ‘jocularity’ to ‘caprice.’

Even at the end of the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, the word was still used in quaint archaic ways, many of which to-day would themselves strike us as ‘humorous.’ Take this example. There was written about a century and a half ago a goody-goody book (which used to be read to all good children) entitled *Sandford and Merton*. It told the story of two little boys, Tommy Merton, the rich and spoiled offspring of a West Indian planter, and Harry Sandford, the humble but virtuous son of Farmer Sandford. The rich little boy being placed along with the poor little boy under the tutorship of a Mr. Barlow, himself a paragon of conduct and information, is brought to an entire change of character and reflects the white light of unselfishness in which live Mr. Barlow and little Harry. Mr. Merton, grateful for his son’s moral regeneration, wishes to do something for Farmer Sandford. He offers him a closed pocket-book as “a slight proof of his sentiments.” We are told that:—

“*Mr. Sandford, who was a man of sense and humour, took the book, and examining the inside found that it contained bank-notes to the amount of some hundred pounds. He then carefully shut it up again and returned it to Mr. Merton.*” Just where the fun came in, we are not told. Perhaps it was because Merton in the sequel gave the farmer a team of horses worth a good deal more than the pocket-book.

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So much for the etymology and the changing meaning of the word humor. If we, then, ask what the origin and what the development of the thing we now call humor, we can find light by shifting the enquiry from humor itself to the parallel and cognate phenomenon of laughter. Humor itself, as we know it now and as we have defined it above, with the element of human kindness as its most essential ingredient, could not have existed in the twilight of primitive civilization. But laughter, a physiological phenomenon, appears earlier in a definite and recognizable form and laughter is at least closely connected with humor. It is true that many humorous people seldom laugh and that many people with little sense of humor laugh a great deal. Yet the two go together. A very good practical test of a funny story, for example, is whether people laugh at it.

It will be found, indeed, that the discussions of an earlier time from Aristotle to Hazlitt, turn rather on what is laughter than on what is humor. Now laughter is as old as human speech and no doubt far older. Our use of language grew up, like everything else in our make-up and our actions, from imperceptible beginnings. Just how speech started is a matter on which scholars fail to agree. Perhaps it began with attempts at vocal imitation of nature's sounds—*splashes* and *crashes* and *whizzes* and of the *bow-wow's* and *baa's* of our animal cousins. Perhaps it began with physical exclamations as when a man says 'Whoof!' on a terribly hot day, or in a sort of rhythmic nerve stimulus to action as when sailors work to a 'chanty,' or a clown hops on the stage with a 'ta-ra-ra-boom-de-eh!' No doubt the definite significance of words was preceded by the understood significance of undertones, of whines and growls and barks, that we still instinctively use when we talk to a dog or a baby or to a sweetheart. These undertones, indeed, still lie beneath our speech and a lot of its meaning and emphasis is derived from them. Professors bark. Bankers grunt. Retired colonels snort. Lovers purr, and dowagers neigh. Take all the growls and grunts out of language, and you have the toneless talk of the radio announcer—*vox et praeterea nihil*—admirable for information, but powerless to persuade.

But most of all, we laugh. This is a physiological trick carried down from our monkey days. Aristotle is scarcely correct when he says that man is the only laughing animal. There is good ground for saying that the *primates* all laugh—the word here being used to include not only archbishops and bishops, but orangoutangs, gorillas and chimpanzees. The 'laughing jackass' is another case in point, while the loon of the Canadian lakes emits a sardonic laugh more mocking than anything human. It would be distressing to have one in a lecture audience.

But the laughter of mankind was more and more specialized to one particular line of development. Its first origin, if we may believe what seems the likeliest

physiological conjecture, was in a sort of shout of exultation or triumph, the cry of the savage over his fallen enemy, the ‘Ha! Ha!’ of the stage villain, or its mild and gentle transformation into the ‘merry ha! ha!’ given to a man in a minor discomfiture. This idea, that laughter originated in ‘exultation,’ at least fits in with the familiar dictum of Plato that we laugh at the misfortunes of others for joy that we do not share them. It squares exactly with the remarks of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, of the seventeenth century, who expressed his incisive thought with a point and brilliance given to few. “The passion of laughter,” he says, “is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the inferiority of others, or with our own formerly.” This is wonderful, and carries us all the way from the exulting laugh of the triumphant savage to the ‘mocking laugh’ of the melodrama.

It thus appears that our sense of humor, like so much else about us, sprang from lowly and even discreditable origins. With certain races of mankind, humor never seems to have got beyond this primitive brutal stage of cruel exultation. This is the laughter of the original American Indian, a being well calculated to carry off the Solemnity Prize in the history of mankind. From all we read of him he was a creature without humor. “A Roman Senate,” says the historian Francis Parkman, “might have taken a lesson from the grave solemnity of an Indian council. In the midst of his family and friends he hides his affections under a mask of icy coldness. . . . In his feasts and drinking bouts we find none of that robust and full-toned mirth which reigned at the rude carousals of our barbaric ancestry. He is never jovial in his cups, and maudlin sorrow and maniacal rage are the sole result of his potations.”

A contemporary writer has added to the words of Parkman a similar judgment expressed in verse.

*The Painted Indian rides no more,  
He stands—at a Tobacco Store,  
His cruel face proclaims afar  
The terror of the cheap cigar.*

The Indian, indeed, has not been without his defenders. Modern scholarship is seldom content to let a good thing alone. So we find a recent American writer in an entertaining *Clinic on the Comic* telling us that the Indian “is given to abundant laughter in the seclusion of his own wig-wam or camp-fire.” It may be so. Few of us have been privileged to penetrate the seclusion of the wig-wam; and to be secluded in a camp-fire seems a little painful. In any case the remarks could only refer to the Indian of later times, damaged by contact with the whites. The laugh of the original

Indian was limited to his yells of exultation.

But it would be a great error to build up a theory that primitive races laugh less or have less sense of humor than civilized peoples. In many cases it appears the other way. Negroes—whether in African forests, or in slave-gangs in the rice-fields, or on the west side of Chicago—can always laugh more and at much less than white people. Their sense of humor, if we look at the sheer quantity of it as compared with its texture, is no doubt greater. It is like electricity measured by flow, not force. There's an awful lot of it but at a low voltage. Probably most of our ancestors were more or less of this type, their huge guffaws over nothing contrasting with our modern audiences half ashamed to laugh, and our Nestors disdaining even to smile. It is probably that with all the exquisite development of our humor from primitive fun to refined reflection, the power to laugh at it grows less—the hearty, open and unrestrained laugh passing out of our common possession and becoming a rarity or a stage trick.

We are saying, then, that humor had its origin in exultation. This theory has of course been frequently denied as has every other theory about everything else. But taking it by and large, and with all the hypothetical character that goes with all discussion of primitive beginnings, it can at least stand as something between a working hypothesis and an accepted truth. Humor meant exultation, the sense of personal triumph over one's adversary, or the sense of delight in seeing something—anything—demolished or knocked out of shape. In such a form it was older than written language, and no doubt older than language itself, belonging in the age of grunts and barks out of which language arose. It expressed itself in action, not in words. We can find still plenty of traces of this primitive humor existing to-day. A broken umbrella with the ribs sticking out through the cloth looks 'funny': a clown with a mouth far too big and a little pill-box hat far too small, looks 'funny.' He stands for the demolition or destruction of the human face as it is and the hat as it should be. A practical joke such as putting a bent pin on a schoolmaster's chair, or having a water-pot upset on an unsuspecting head, a cigar which lights only to explode—all these effects recall to us the wordless humor of primitive man. The moving pictures in their comic effects contain bucketfuls of it. They turn the world upside down when Mickey Mouse and such defy, and demolish, in their speed and their transformations, all the laws of the physical universe. They take a laugh out of Isaac Newton.

Even in our written literature of humor, in that part of it which we call comic, we can still reach back to these primitive effects. That cheerful genius, the late Captain Harry Graham of the *Ruthless Rhymes*, could turn us all back into laughing savages

by the happy trick of turning back the clock a few thousand years and inviting us to participate in a simple joy at the misfortunes of others.

*Grandpapa fell down a drain,  
Couldn't scramble out again.  
Now he's floating down the sewer,  
There's one grandpapa the fewer.*

We call such things as this comic, little thinking how far back it reaches and how thoroughly it would be appreciated by a Potawatami Indian.

But from the earliest stages of human development malice had to take account of the contrary principle of sympathy. It was a conflict of light and darkness, long as the ages. Most of us would agree, though some would try to deny it, that the human race on the whole has improved in moral outlook; not so much perhaps in spirituality of outlook, 'other-worldliness,' for this seems to be slipping away; but at least in an increased sense of sympathy with the pain and suffering of others. The notion of the deliberate infliction of pain disturbs us as it seldom disturbed the earlier races of mankind. In us are yet tendencies that can still sweep us into mob-brutality, and wild and sudden cruelty. But what was once the rule is now the exception and what was once indifference is now distress.

As a consequence humor, all through the period that we call civilization, has been undergoing a refining process. The 'exultation' must somehow keep away the reality of harm and arise as it were out of the appearance of it. It is no longer funny if grandpapa disappears down a sewer, but if he sits down in a puddle, it is. A man with a broken leg trying to walk is not comic, as it seems to have been to the Greek gods whose sense of humor was low. They laughed, it will be recalled, when Hephaestus fell out of heaven and went limping round with a broken leg. But we of to-day would keep our 'Homeric laughter' for a man who had slipped on a banana peel, or limped with 'pins and needles' and wasn't really hurt.

Humor, in other words, changed from a basis of injury or destruction, to what one may describe as a basis of 'incongruity' or 'maladjustment.' It is in this form that it began to find its place more and more with the rise of literature when the spoken and written word becomes the prevalent method of communication of human beings in place of the pantomime and grunts and direct action of primitive beings. And more and more it became possible to derive humorous satisfaction out of the incongruities of speech itself, queer inconsistencies and oddities of speech. So that 'wit' comes into being as the general name for humorous expression, turning upon or accompanied by, verbal effects. In later chapters these will be considered in further

detail.

It becomes therefore a principal thesis of this treatise that both the sense of humor and the expression of it undergo in the course of history an upward and continuous progress. Its advance has necessarily been rather in zigzags and spirals than in a straight line. No one would suppose that everything in each century is better than in the one before. But viewed in a broad way, as seen from a great altitude, the movement is recognized to be of that sort. But as with every attempt to reduce our knowledge to an orderly and regular outline, we meet serious difficulties at the very outset. Many classical scholars would assure us that the comic drama of the Greeks, as exemplified by Aristophanes, has never been surpassed, just as they hold that the tragic drama also, to say nothing of history and philosophy, were cast in a mould that broke when Athens fell.

It is a point that is discussed later on in this volume. But at least few will claim that the 'humor' of the Romans—whether we mean by it what they had inside them or what they managed to express, was in any way on a par with ours. Humor cannot smile at an arena.

The Dark Ages may have been the age of inner light. But it was not an era of lambent wit. Mediæval scholars got little further than the mere wit of pedantry, anagrams and acrostics, with no other merit than that of getting fun out of grammar, which is like getting water out of sand. Rude fun, of course, there was in the 'people's plays' that helped, along with God's miracles, to create our drama. But it was rude: it was horseplay—what horses would write if they could. We reach the time of Chaucer and again the scholars shake their heads at us and defy us to produce again the humor of the *Canterbury Tales*. To answer would be to quarrel. But we may at least hint that their judgment is historical and relative. Only when we reach the Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan age, with Shakespeare and Molière, are we in the presence of humor of the highest class. But it is still the eminence of the single mountain, all the taller for its isolation. The general level is far lower. Indeed as the land rises the mountains lose their apparent height and no new eminence seems to be equal to the old.

We observe how human converse and manners soften with the later Stuarts. Here breathes the soft atmosphere of tobacco, quickened with the genial stimulus of the coffee berry, and moist with the soft dew of the tea-plant, replacing the everlasting bellyful of semialcoholic swill on which our ruder ancestors were roused to fury and soused to slumber. The new age sees the beginning of real toleration, of inquisitive science, and of the geniality in literature that finds voice in the humor of the Steeles, the Addisons and the Goldsmiths.

As we pass into the nineteenth century we seem to move from sun-flecked shadow into the open sun. For the modern world it is high noon when the century is well in, and with Charles Dickens the sun is at its very zenith. With the great humor of the nineteenth century, with Mr. Pickwick, with Huckleberry Finn, with Tartarin, we find ourselves in our own world. We are still in its sunshine. But whether it is lessening we cannot tell. With our descent to our own day, we have lost our altitude of vision.

Yet it is not implied in this thesis that the movement of the humorous impulse or the expression of the humorous idea was in all cases consistently inspired by human kindness. The original devil of malice was not so easily exorcized. It still survives. The development of humor was not always and exclusively of a refining character. One is tempted to think that perhaps the original source parted into two streams. In one direction flowed, clear and undefiled, the humor of human kindness. In the other, the polluted waters of mockery and sarcasm, the ‘humor’ that turned to the cruel sports of rough ages, the infliction of pain as a perverted source of pleasure, and even the rough horseplay, the practical jokes and the impish malice of the schoolboy. Here belongs ‘sarcasm’—that scrapes the flesh of human feeling with a hoe—the sardonic laugh (by derivation a sort of rictus of the mouth from a poison weed), the sneer of the scoffer, and the snarl of the literary critic as opposed to the kindly tolerance of the humorist. Not even death, if we may believe the spiritualists, terminates the evil career of the practical joker. He survives as the thing called a ‘poltergeist’ in German—or a something or other in English—a malicious noisy spirit, haunting for haunting’s sake, and unfortunately beyond the grasp of the law.

Yet undeterred by this malicious counterpart, humor goes upon its way, moving from lower to higher forms, from cruelty to horseplay, from horseplay to wit, from wit to the higher ‘humor of character’ (independent of the single phrase) and beyond that to its highest stage as the humor of life itself. Here tears and laughter are joined, and our little life, incongruous and vain, is rounded with a smile.

*Chapter II*  
*THE EXPRESSION OF HUMOR: WORDS*

We turn from considering the general nature of humor to the question of its expression, which means the way in which it is 'put over.' Indeed, one may revert to etymology and say that the expression of humor means the way it is expressed, or 'pressed out,' like wine from grapes as it were. First we may discuss the humor got out of mere words, that is, incongruities found in the words themselves, probably the most primitive method of humor conveyed in language as apart from pantomime, gesture and action. When we see dogs at play we realize that they have reached the humor of action—elusive dodging, artful nipping of the hind leg, etc. This means more than the mere 'learning to fight' which some biologists see in it, a sort of survival quality to sustain the evolution of dogs. It has in it the quite different element of 'fun,' of nascent humor. But dogs never get beyond this. If they could start a series of funny barks, imitative barks, wrong kind of barks, and do barking for barking's sake, that would be the dawning humor of words. But they don't.

Primitive races must have begun very early to find incongruities in their first beginnings of speech that would make the first beginnings of verbal humor. The kind of languages that they used, agglutinative, and made of combinations of repeated monosyllables all alike till rearranged or 'resung' in a different way, would lend themselves to it. The Chinese language, still of this form, must be, if I understand it right, one enormous pun. It is as if one struck in English such combinations as "Let's have a ship-shape shop!" Compare the rapid remark of the busy French butcher—"À qui sont ces saucissons-ci et à qui sont ces saucissons là?" or the immortal "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers."

Thus do we notice little children just beginning to talk mutter a word, and then fall to laughing at it. We are here witnessing the child repeat, as it does in all things, the evolution of the race. The little creature is back in Asia, fifty thousand years ago. It would be greatly to be desired that some properly equipped scholar should make an investigation and write a work on "Primitive Humor." No doubt many scholars, anthropologists, have come very close to the topic: but the doubt is whether they are properly equipped. A blind man cannot write on sight.

From the point of view of the world of the last three thousand years, the world of written books, the earliest forms of 'fun with words' seem to be found in repetition, in rhythm, in alliteration, in double sense to single sound (puns), and in queer scholarly trickeries of language such as anagrams, acrostics, and crossword puzzles.

Repetition, saying a thing twice over—and ‘then some’—is one of the oldest and most obvious methods of emphasis, of imitation and, in a sense, of amusement. We still revert to it very naturally when we talk of a ‘long, long way,’ a ‘big, big man’ or in the familiar ‘very, very’ so much used in England. One has the idea (quite unprovable) that this is more habitual in the Old World than the New—English people are more apt to talk of the ‘blue, blue sky,’ lingering on its blueness, than we are in the New World. We make it blue and let it go at that, in too big a hurry for a second coat of color. But I think we lose something of the simple emphasis of repetition. Such a phrase as ‘my old, old friend’ is better than ‘my old friend, if he will permit me to call him so, having known him for forty, I think it is forty, years.’ Repetition is also used, and always has been, for imitation—such words as hippety-hop, clopin-clopant, bumpety-bump.

Repetition as used for whole phrases and apart from single words is also based on the principle of conservatism, of liking to meet an old friend again, or enjoying again a sensation once before enjoyed. Thus Homer keeps on saying “tell Hector with the waving plume,” though he could easily have distinguished him more briefly as T. W. Hector. There is a well-worn story of a curate who could not, apparently, grasp the excellence of this primitive principle of repetition which is nowhere better illustrated than in the Old Testament. Finding that the text of the Lesson he had to read kept repeating the words “harp, flute, sackbut, psaltery and dulcimer,” he substituted the phrase “the band as before.” That curate should have lived in Kansas.

But repetition used, so to speak, for ‘fun,’ was born early and has never died. How easily we reach out for such nicknames as Jo-Jo or Poppo-Poppo: how instinctively we accept such a combination as Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-eh, and how pleasant it is to know that there is actually an American newspaper that carries on its title-page “The Walla-Walla Wahoo, Walla-Walla, Wash.”

Repetition verges close on what may be called ‘rhythm,’ meaning combinations of words that have a special appeal by adding sound to sense. ‘Rhyme’ is of course the most obvious example, but metrical forms, and any combination of spoken sounds that please the ear, are of the same class. At times the sound used in speech imitates the sound of the thing discussed—onomatopoeic forms, as the grammarians called them. Rhythm is far more used for beauty than for humor, for harmony rather than for incongruity. But at times we get amusement out of sets of words for their very lack of rhythm—*lucus a non lucendo*. Compare, for example, Tom Hood’s line:

*“Even is come and from the dark park, hark.”*

Sometimes a set of syllables becomes so smooth and rhythmical and flows so easily that we can't understand what they mean, which sets up an incongruity between the appearance of speech and the fact of unintelligibility.

*“Didon dina dit-on du dos d'un dodu dindon.”*

French lends itself especially to such over-rhythms as this, being, in spite of its beauty, a highly unintelligible language—at least to the dull Anglo-Saxon ear. When two comfortable middle-aged Frenchmen sit side by side in easy chairs in converse, it is hard for our ears to tell whether they are talking or just gargling.

In the highest class of comic verse (a theme which deserves a volume) the very ease of the rhythm becomes, as it were, a source of humor. No one excelled in this the late W. S. Gilbert, many of whose lines became laughable for what seems the very aptness, the *inevitability*, of the rhythmical effect.

*“It's grasped a better hand than yourn—  
Come, gov'nor, I insist!”  
The Captain stared! the bo'sun glared—  
The hand became a fist!*

(The Bab Ballads.)

People might well keep repeating “the hand became a fist” and chuckling over it, just as a baby chuckles over the words it learns to say.

The device of alliteration—the reappearance of one and the same letter—used as a means of emphasis or of amusement, seems also to go back as far as written language and no doubt further. The Anglo-Saxon used it in what they understood to be poetry. Lines of Cynewulf, ‘improved’ into modern English, read

*Winsome is the wold there: There the wealds are green,  
Spacious spread below the skies; there may neither snow nor rain,  
Nor the furious air of frost, nor the flare of fire, etc., etc.*

The device, however, is as young as it is old. In America, at least, alliterative combinations are still created afresh, with every decade, with almost every day—‘sob-sisters’ and ‘lounge-lizards’ and ‘boy-bandits,’ *ad infinitum*.

The alliterative newspaper heading has been used, and over-used, in America for a generation. An American newspaper man making up a title instinctively looks for alliteration. He cannot bear to write “Criminal Escapes”; he would sooner sacrifice some of the meaning and write “Vandal Vamps,” or “Dangerous Desperado Disappears.” It always defies analysis to see why alliterate headings should carry

emphasis unless it is, or was once long ago, for the shock of surprise: and since then it is mere custom. It is easier to see why alliterative combinations are, or once were, ‘funny’: there is an evident incongruity of language, a piece of ‘fun with words.’

But of all mere devices of language the one that stands supreme through the ages, denounced and execrated but refusing to die, is the pun. *Expellas furco, tamen usque recurrit*. By a pun is meant the use of a word or phrase which has two meanings which the context brings into a glaring incongruity. Thus when Tom Hood writes of a veteran of the Peninsular War that he had “left his leg in Badajoz’s breeches,” we get at once a marvellous contrast and incongruity between what has happened to him, and what seems to have, but didn’t. The pun in and of itself is just a matter of words, *vox et praeterea nihil*, and this is why it has been so roundly and so soundly execrated. An execrable pun (the phrase clings to it) is one that has no other point to it than just the similarity of word sounds. “He who would make a pun would pick a pocket,” Dr. Johnson is said to have said but didn’t say, or didn’t say first. But a pun may have a saving grace as well. The combination may be so ingenious that the very ingenuity pleases. It tickles us, so to speak. Let us take in proof a well-known story. There was an heroic poem, by Thomas Campbell, on the battle of Hohenlinden (A.D. 1800) which caught the attention of the English world of that day and which began:

*On Linden when the sun was low,  
All bloodless lay the untrodden snow,  
And dark as winter was the flow  
Of Iser rolling rapidly.*

That’s the introduction, take that for granted. Now it happened that the witty someone-or-other, attempting to pay an evening call on his friend Campbell, and finding the stairway narrow and dark, slipped and fell with a great deal of clatter down the stairway. Campbell, hearing the noise, put his head out of his door at the top of the landing and called, “What’s that?” To which his falling friend called back, “I, sir, rolling rapidly.”

There is no sense in this, no philosophy or reflection, but the “cussed” ingenuity of it appeals to us. Take this further example.

It is related of the famous American humorist Bill Nye, who flourished at a time when puns were still permitted, and even enjoyed in America, that he was once introduced to Sir Mackenzie Bowell (rhyming with howl), a leading Canadian statesman of the day, and asked him very modestly if he was one of the “Bowels of Compassion, Ohio.” There is no sense in this, no meaning and no depth; and

perhaps there never were any Bowels of Compassion, Ohio, anyway. But the parallel of sound is so ingenious and so complete that it appeals. Indeed, as will presently be seen in the case of anagrams, it seems as if the appreciation of ingenuity and the sense of amusement lie close together. This may well be, because ingenuity performing the impossible sets up a sort of natural or physical incongruity. We laugh when we see a conjurer make a billiard-ball vanish from his hand, or take a half-crown piece out of a boy's ear. Similarly we laugh at each new and ingenious little machine—for instance the latest American one in which you stand on a platform, drop in a nickel, and the machine, thirty seconds later, hands you a framed photograph of yourself. In each case custom presently makes stale the effect and laughter dies. If a man fell down our stairs every morning and said, "It's I, sir, rolling rapidly," he would get tiresome. But while the novelty of the ingenious effect lasts it carries amusement.

But very often a pun has a much higher saving grace than mere ingenuity. It carries with it a further meaning. It becomes a subtle way of saying something with much greater point than plain matter-of-fact statement. Indeed, it often enables one to say with delicacy things which would never do if said outright.

Compare the writings of the Middle Ages in which dialogues as between animals represented talk which one dared not ascribe to prelates and cardinals. You can say in a barnyard what you had better not say in a court. Compare also the veiled writings of the eighteenth century in letters from Persia, or stories of Abyssinia as used to criticize the uncriticizable institutions of France or England. So with the pun as a form of polite satire where direct attack would be uncivil and displeasing. One thinks here of the famous and often-quoted pun of the Rev. Sydney Smith when he said to his fellow-canons of St. Paul's Cathedral who were discussing the question of a wooden side-walk round the edifice. "Come, gentlemen, lay your heads together and the thing is done." Observe that the pun itself is buried in the two meanings of the word wooden. But if Dr. Smith had said, "Gentlemen, you canons are a wooden-headed interminable lot of bores," it would convey the same truth but with an unpermissible directness.

All the really best puns are of this last class; and on such a footing the pun deserves to survive and does survive in England, though to an American editor a pun is as a red rag to a bull. Strangely enough, the puns of the greatest punster who ever punned in England, Thomas Hood, were almost entirely of the cheapest class, the execrable puns with no second meaning to save them. Hood himself once wrote in exculpation—

*However critics may take offence  
A double meaning has double sense.*

Yet the great mass of his puns have only a double sound without any second meaning of sense. Take, as proof, some of those most quoted: "He went and told the sexton and the sexton tolled the bell" . . . "A cannon ball took off his legs, so he laid down his arms" . . .

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Puns are of great antiquity, although the word itself is new, is English only and quite lost as to its etymology. It seems to have been in more or less frequent use from about the time of Queen Anne, but where it came from no one knows. Scholars tell us that it may be the Welsh word *pun* which means 'the same.' But then again it may not. It is also possible that it connects with 'point' and 'punctilio'; also that it doesn't.

Oddly enough, the pun can be used in a sense that is rather derisive than humorous. It was said above that the original stream of humor of exultation and demolition changed, or rather divided into the separate channels of kindly humor and cruel humor. So it would seem that the play upon words can be used not to create a laugh but to intensify the emotions of contempt. This may be—or it may not be—the explanation of Shakespeare's use of puns at critical moments of a drama. "Old Gaunt indeed, and gaunt in being old." John of Gaunt is not trying to be funny, nor, presumably, is Shakespeare. Gaunt is getting bitter about himself and 'rubbing it in' by taking a crack even at his very name. So with the famous 'pun,' if we dare call it so, made by Pope Gregory about the little English boys sold in the Roman slave market. "*Non Angli sed Angeli.*" In that charming book *In Pursuit of Laughter* (1936) we read: "*Of course it is a pun and a very good one. But its note of profound and prophetic sympathy has done much more than its wit to keep it alive for thirteen hundred years.*" In other words, the play of sound is used for point not for humor.

This is a matter which would readily admit of further study. If this little book, having the dignity of forming part of a university library, is used by students seriously interested, one might suggest that a thesis *On the Literary Use of Puns* would be a valuable field of study. But no doubt the answer is that a German has already written it.

The punster pays the full penalty, and even more than the full one, that has been seen to attach to humorous writers as opposed to those without humor. People won't 'take him seriously.' Thomas Hood, who started his *Comic Annual* in 1830,

aspired more and more to be a satirist of public affairs, a champion of good causes, as witness his matchless *Song of the Shirt* published in the *Christmas Punch* of 1843, and since become a part of the history of England. Here is a poem undisfigured by any incidental and inappropriate puns. But with most of Hood's work the case was otherwise and he found it more and more difficult to get himself taken seriously. The fact that he crowded even his serious essays with puns, spoiled his work for serious acceptance. To write with humor is bad enough. But to write with puns goes too far. Even Sydney Smith, whose puns were few and far between, as mere occasional fireworks, but whose humor was like a sustained glow of heat, found it hard to get himself accepted at full value. "Now I can do something for Sydney Smith," said Lord Grey when the Whigs came in in 1830. But he found that Sydney Smith was not the stuff of which bishops are made.

But there is perhaps a special reason why punsters, not humorists at large, should pay this penalty. The law often goes on the principle that an example must be made: military law starts from this idea: and in the courts of Kentucky, we are informed, it is a maxim of law that it is better that a hundred innocent men should be hanged rather than that one guilty one escape. So with the punsters. Common observation shows that his activity is a menace to society. It runs easily to a sort of mental degeneration in which the unhappy victim tries to make puns all the time, hears only sounds and not ideas, his mind as vacant as a bell waiting for its clapper. Many people hate the idea of drinking because of drunkards—and so do many hate puns because of punsters. Poetic justice therefore warns them in time.

As most people know, puns and the punning habit ran riot in Victorian England. Thomas Hood was merely the brightest star in a galaxy, or if one will, the blackest spot in a darkened sky.

In America puns never assumed the place which they occupied in England. American humor, after the democratic age began, ran in its own channels. This was when the newer civilization that had crossed the Alleghanies to the valleys of the Ohio and the Mississippi said good-bye to the older culture of New England and Virginia, outposts of Europe, and started a culture of its own. In humor it ran to tall stories, gargantuan exaggerations and new words and expressions reflecting the new life of the West. It did not tend very much towards puns: in a sense a pun is a scholarly thing, or at least a degenerate product of scholarship. Pope Gregory's joke, or his musing, whichever it was, can't be appreciated without Latin declensions. But the new America found its own luxuriant riot in the humor of bad spelling. This became as widespread, as execrable and as tiresome as the pun in England. The earliest (puerile) writings of Mark Twain show him as attempting to be

funny in this way. He soon shook loose from it. But other celebrities of the day—Artemus Ward and Josh Billings—maintained the same style through life. Here is an example that is historic—

### *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 and 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 pussy-lanermus 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 3rd. degree.*

This is famous as the extract which Abraham Lincoln read to his cabinet before he showed them his Emancipation Proclamation. It is pretty steep reading for us today. We have to adopt towards it the same reverent attitude that we have for Greek jokes. What is more, unless Lincoln had explained the spelling, which so far as is known he didn't, the cabinet couldn't get it. This is another shortcoming of bad spelling, that it appeals only to the eye.

It is not difficult to account for the vogue of bad spelling in America. In England it made no hit as humor because it had existed for centuries as a matter of custom and indifference. When Mr. Weller told the court in *Bardell v. Pickwick* that his name could be spelt according to the "taste and fancy of the speller," he hit exactly the English point of view towards spelling from Elizabethan and Stuart times till

almost our own day. It was no great matter. Prince Rupert was probably one of the most brilliant men of the seventeenth century and, in the proper sense of the word, the most scholarly. Yet we have only to read his letters, as printed in Warburton's *Life* with his own spelling, to realize that he would just as soon spell 'dog' with two g's as not. The English nation at large never learned to read and spell till the middle of the nineteenth century.

At the opening of Queen Victoria's reign about half the people of England were illiterate and half of the other half not much better. On marriage registers two-thirds of the brides 'made their mark.' In big towns such as Liverpool, only half the children went to schools and the other half, says Mr. G. M. Young (*Victorian England*, 1936), "did not miss much."

In America the case was different. Public education began in New England with the arrival of the Pilgrims. The little red school became the Oxford of America. England began at the top: America at the bottom. The spelling-book and the 'spelling-bee' were part of the life of the settler. Hence bad spelling had all the fascination that goes with irreverence, and all the incongruity that lay between the rigorous correctness of the spelling-book and the wild luxuriance of free spelling, that somehow hit the mark as well. Presently, as higher culture spread and the West became easternized, America discarded bad spelling as pointless in a world of rotary presses and clicking typewriters. It only exists now in the desperately silly idea of gradual spelling reform, which is like an attempt to grow one hair at a time. It has broken out again recently, however, as a sort of nemesis in the new form of bad spelling used in advertising to attract attention, and perhaps to gain custom by amusing the 'prospect.' Hence 'fit-rite' clothes, and 'nite' restaurants and 'Uneeda' biscuits and much else.

Bad spelling having been at length ruled out of court as not funny, the same idea comes in again through a side door in the form of bad typing. The weird possibilities of mechanical errors in typewriting are known to everyone who has tried to learn how to use a machine. The effects are often grotesque. No reproduction of them was ever happier than that effected by Mr. A. P. Herbert in a discussion of "Criminal Type" in his delightful volume *Light Articles Only*. He begins:

*To-day I am MAKing aN inno6£vation, as you mayalready have gessed, I am typlng this article myself Zz½Instead of writing it, The idea is to save time and exvBKpense, also to demonstratO that I can type /ust as well as any blessedgirl if I give my mind to iT""*

But after all any humor that can be got out of bad typing is under the same limitation as the humor of bad spelling. It reaches only the eye, not the ear. It is even

more limited than bad spelling since it can't be explained in words even if one tries. Parallel to this is the new department of humor over the radio which of necessity becomes 'fun in the dark.'

A peculiar mode of verbal humor has of recent years been introduced or emphasized in America in the form, not of bad spelling, but of bad grammar. This is written as an exact transcription of what people say, not as an exaggeration, and is handled always with a peculiar moderation, never overdone and never interfering with the flow of the narrative. The writer uses "I could of done it," instead of "I could have": "Me and Mary," instead of "Mary and I" as the subject, and reversed for the object—"He used to visit Mary and I." In this method the present tense is used for the past, as is widely done in America, not in the old grammatical sense for vividness, as when one would say—"The room was empty, but what do I see lying on the floor, etc., etc.," a form which used to be called in the grammar books the 'dramatic present tense.' Not at all. The use here meant runs like this—"I come home about six and this feller is waiting for me in the kitchen along with a gentleman who had come to fix the sink." Notice the use of the word 'gentleman' used indiscriminately in this style and helping to give it the false elegance with which the bad grammar contrasts. Indeed, the point lies in this contrast between what is at times elegant diction, and its glaring absurdities. 'Gentleman' is freely used, but two gentlemen switch into 'boys,' etc. You may write of 'a crowd of women,' but each single one is a 'lady.' That lost genius Ring W. Lardner was a perfect master of this method. Here, for example, is a scene in elegant life when a husband is moved into a new apartment by his wife and her sister:

*"Well, I was just getting used to the Baldwin when Ella says it was time for us to move.*

*"I and Kate,' she says, 'has made up our minds to do things our own way with our own money. . . . All as we want is a place that's good enough and big enough for Sis to entertain her gentlemen callers in it and she certainly can't do that in this hotel. . . ."*

*"Well,' I says, 'all her gentleman callers that's been around here in the last month, she could entertain them in one bunch in a telephone booth.*

*"On the third afternoon they (the two ladies) busted in all smiles.*

*"We got a bargain,' said Ella. 'It's in the nicest kind of neighborhood and we can't meet nothing only the best kind of people. You'll go simply wild! They's a colored boy in uniform to open the door and they's two elevators. "*

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There is far more art in this than in the old discriminate exaggeration of bad

spelling; how much art can be realized at once by anybody who tries to imitate it. The same effect is admirably achieved by Anita Loos in the famous best-seller *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925). Here the humorous effect is produced by the reproduction of such a desperate struggle towards good grammar that it produces a sort of super-grammar.

*“Mr. Spoffard told us all about his mother and I was really very very intreeged because if Mr. Spoffard and I become friendly he is the kind of gentleman that always wants a girl to meet his mother. I mean if a girl gets to know what kind of a mother a gentleman’s mother is like, she really knows more what kind of a conversation to use on a gentleman’s mother when she meets her. Because a girl like I is really always on the verge of meeting gentlemen’s mothers. But such an unrefined girl as Dorothy is really not the kind of girl that ever meets gentlemen’s mothers.”*

But there are further modes of humor arising out of single words far more subtle and far more legitimate than either puns or bad spelling. One of these is the use of a word that is the wrong word for the sense but the right word for the sound: in other words using the wrong word in the right way. This is seen in the speech of people who try deliberately to use big words, as the Negroes do, or at times sententious Cockneys. Indeed, the attempt is the humble and creditable prompting of a mind that would like to have been educated and never was, and finds in words a wistful and appealing grandeur.

To turn this misuse of words into humorous expression is a delicate art. Done clumsily it is as tiresome as bad spelling. At its best it is wonderful. Mark Twain hit it off marvellously in his character of “old Mr. Ballou” in the Western book *Roughing It*. On one occasion a group of Westerners, including Mr. Ballou, are lost in the snow and think themselves about to perish and one says, *“Let’s die without hard feeling towards each other: I freely admit that I have had hard feelings against Mr. Ballou for abusing me and calling me a logarithm; it has hurt me a good deal but let it go.”* One might search the whole dictionary and find nothing to equal ‘logarithm.’

Mark Twain also was able to utilize admirably the converse verbal trick of using a word or phrase that is suddenly and amazingly right, contrary to all expectation. He has a story called *Cannibalism in the Cars*, the idea of which is that a number of Congressmen being snowed in on a mountain train, and about to die of hunger, resort to cannibalism but employ in connection with it the full legislative procedures to which they are accustomed. Notice in the present connection the use made of a verb in the following sentence.

*“The next morning we had Morgan of Alabama for breakfast, one of the finest men I ever sat down to.”*

The writings of O. Henry offer innumerable examples. Any student of humor who wants a lesson in the possibilities of verbal technique should study the language placed by O. Henry in the mouths of Jefferson Peters and Parlez-voos Pickers in the volume *The Gentle Grafter*.

The same idea of misused terms has been exploited on an extended scale with delightful success by Mr. A. P. Herbert in a ‘piece’ in which the names of flowers are transformed in delirious fashion. The true gardener (or horticulturist, as he would call himself) never cares to give a flower an English name if he can give it a Latin one. To him snapdragon is not snapdragon, but ‘antirrhinum’ and “a primrose by the river’s brim” becomes one of the Primulaceae distinguished by its tubular corolla and spreading lobes. Mr. Herbert sees his chance and fills the flowerbeds with a nosegay of blossoms that must be read to be appreciated.

An ingenious verbal device, closely related to those mentioned, is where a metaphor is suddenly ‘disconnected’ and sounds like an absurdity. Ever so many of our words are metaphors, that is, words that meant something else and were used as a striking form of comparison. The man who first called the skyline of the Spanish mountains ‘sierras’ (saws) made a great hit.

We use a lot of verbs metaphorically as when we talk, let us say, in connection with rebuilding a house, of ‘throwing the hall into the dining-room.’ Literally this is absurd, and the absurdity becomes patent if we repeat the phrase enough to call attention to it. “*Acting on the specialist’s advice,*” wrote Harry Graham in his inimitable *Private Life of Gregory Gorm*, “*Lord Porcupine began on the ground-floor by throwing the dining-room into the front hall. He then proceeded to throw the smoking-room into the billiard-room, and the drawing-room into the study, and, by throwing the library into the gun-room, provided an excellent dining-room to replace the one he had thrown into the front hall. This, however, involved throwing the pantry into the kitchen, and the kitchen into the servants’ hall, and having gone thus far, it became inevitably necessary to throw the servants’ hall somewhere, and there was nowhere left to throw it except into the garden.*”

People of a humorous turn notice these absurdities readily: solemn people never.

Twisted uses of words are sometimes made with a further artful implication of a new meaning, just as the pun carries a genuine second meaning when legitimately used. Thus the annual Baseball World Series is, or ought to be, the last word in carefree amusement. But mentioned with a Yiddish touch, as the ‘Voild’s Serious,’

the implication is as entertaining as it is obvious.

But there are still deeper and more subtle effects to be got out of individual words than these superficial inconsistencies. It seems more or less clear that certain sounds still retain for us something of their primitive qualities as growls of anger, groans of distress, or yelps of delight. Hence there is a 'tone' quality in words. Nobody needs to be told what a scrumptious afternoon is, or what kind of individual is meant by a *boob*, a *slob*, or a *goof*. Sometimes of course these illuminated words are merely abbreviations or remaking of others, as *boob* is of *booby*: or they are combinations of two into one, like the telescoped words that Lewis Carroll made so famous. Everybody recalls '*brillig*' as meaning '*brilliant twilight*': '*galumping*' a compound of '*galloping and leaping*': a '*vorpal*' sword, to mean perhaps '*violent and fatal*,' and the priceless name '*Rilchiam*' to combine '*Richard and William*.'

But I am claiming here that there is far more in the matter than that. The tones have a sort of instinctive subconscious sound-appeal. Thus when Dickens made up his wonderful proper names, such as Mr. Vholes, Mrs. Gamp, Mr. Tulkinghorn, Mr. Weller, and a hundred others, they are drawn from the under-sound and any connection with other words is either accidental, or by attraction, but not of necessity. Thus Vholes, the name of a rascally lawyer, if you like is *vampire* and *ghoul* but only because it *had* to be: what is Gamp—is it *gruesome* and *damp*?

The subject, one admits, is a difficult one. It is quite possible that many names seem appropriate and self-evident because we have read the book and grown used to him. Pendennis is a good name and Harry Lorrequer and Maggie Tulliver: but if she had been called 'Jane Goodall' would it have made any difference? One feels that Mr. P. G. Wodehouse's Jeeves couldn't have been called anything else. It is a topic that belongs not solely to the subject of the vocabulary of humor and of the mechanism of humor but to the subject of language at large. What is really meant is the question of the extent to which the primitive beginnings of speech still affect living language. A scholarly treatise could be written on the topic *Do We Growl Still?*

If we put together all the various kinds of verbal effects just described, and other lesser and similar ones, we can see at once the distinction that is to be made between humor and wit. We can define wit as being an expression of humor involving an unexpected play upon words. Thus wit is far the lesser term of the two: it is all included under humor. There could not be real wit without humor. It is possible indeed for people with more cheeriness than brains, more voltage than candlepower, with high spirits but low intelligence to chatter away on a line of imitative jokes and secondhand effects without any real humor. But this is only in the same way as a person may be sentimental without sorrow, pious without religion and

didactic without learning. It is this possibility of replacing true wit with imitation, gold with dross, that has led to a tendency to degrade wit as the crackling of thorns under a pot. On the strength of this idea some writers seem to try to separate wit from humor by a line different from that just drawn, as if humor were of a different quality and atmosphere. Definition, of course, is as free as disbelief, and it would be of no value to pile up citations of authority, since the matter lies outside of the ambit of quantitative measurement. But judging in a general way what each of us feels to be the sense attached by good writers and good speakers, the distinction just given, making wit a form of humor, is the one most frequently made and most widely accepted.

We speak, for example, of ‘a witty French Abbé’ because we understand that French Abbés had a way of getting off good things and their good things always turned on words. But whoever writes of a witty Scotsman? Not that there are none; indeed, I am sure that there must be, the population of Scotland being close to five millions. But as a matter of fact the amusement that comes out of Scotland (and the exports of that realm are what make it illustrious—the export of brains, of Scotch whisky, and of golf) somehow always seem to turn on character. Thus:

*A frugal Scot was walking to church barefoot carrying his new Sunday boots under his arm. In walking he stubbed his toe. For a moment he drew it up in pain. Then his face relaxed and he said with a smile of satisfaction, “It would ha’gi’en ’em an awfu’ dig!”* This is not wit; there is no verbal effect in it.

On the other hand, we always talk of a ‘witty Irishman,’ that being the rôle for which the Irish are cast. The Irish are not only witty on purpose, since their nature is merry and they love words, but they are witty by accident, in the verbal form called an Irish bull. This is seen where the sense is clear enough and where the words actually convey it, though if they are taken literally they say something else, something that is quite impossible or quite the contrary of what is meant.

“Indeed, miss,” said the Irish usher of a Dublin theatre, “I’d like to give you a seat but the empty ones are all full.”

An Irish doctor sent in his professional account to a lady with the heading—“For curing your husband till he died.”

It was said above that the form called the pun could be used with but little humor, in the sense of amusement, but rather as a form of point and emphasis. So with wit. If humor in its essence stands for human kindness, one has to admit that at times the forms of wit depart far from it and become like the cold light without heat, like that of the fire-fly, that contrasts with the warmth of a fireplace. Take the wit of the famous Talleyrand who began life as a ‘witty French Abbé,’ and ended it, or

should have, like La Fontaine's wolf, in thinking of "sa longue et méchante vie." Talleyrand left behind him, since he couldn't take them away, a great number of epigrams and *bons mots*. They still pass current in our histories, but in all the lot of them there isn't enough of kindness to warm a frog. He said of the British constitution, "Elle n'existe pas"; he said of Jeremy Bentham, "Pillé par tout le monde il est toujours riche"; he said of Napoleon's pacific proclamations after Elba, "Le loup est devenu berger"; and he said of the Congress of Vienna, "Le congrès danse bien mais ne marche pas."

All of this is wit undoubtedly, but there is a sort of chill to it. If witty people talk like that, I'd prefer to be with Scotsmen.

### Chapter III

## THE EXPRESSION OF HUMOR: IDEAS

We pass in this chapter from the expression of humor effected by the contrasts and incongruities and conflicts of words, as such, to the expression of humor by the incongruity of ideas. Naturally the two run close together. The humor of words is ancillary and auxiliary to the humor of ideas. But the humor of incongruous ideas may be expressed, and often is, without any special departures in the use of the single words.

To illustrate the general notion of humor of ideas as opposed to humor of words, revert again to the pun. Theodore Hook writes: "*A peer appears upon the pier, who blind still goes to sea.*" Any point this has, if it has any, rests on the fact that the sound 'peer' means a 'nobleman,' and to 'come into sight,' and a 'dock': and the sound 'sea' refers to the ocean or to vision. That's all. Similarly when some great forgotten genius first said "Dickens! how it burns!" the terrific amusement lay in the fact that the name of Dickens could be used as an expletive, and 'Burns' meant either conflagration or a Scotsman.

But contrast with the above this newspaper joke dating back to the Spanish-American War of 1898, when the animosity of Spain was tempered by its impecuniosity.

*"Charge!" shouted the Spanish General.*

*"No, not this time," said the contractor sadly: "It will have to be C.O.D."*

There is not only the verbal pun here: there is the sudden juxtaposition of gallantry and accountancy, two ill-assorted things.

Let me take a further example, drawn from the pages of a well-known English weekly. A drawing of two men in a suburban train, evidently commuters, and each a little hard of hearing, carried under it a conversation, which I quote as I recall it:

*"Is this Wemsley?"*

*"No. Thursday."*

*"Yes, I am: let's have a drink."*

This is not just the play on words as between Wemsley and Wednesday: Thursday and thirsty. There's the incongruity between the fact that the men are both deaf, don't hear properly and yet on the whole come out of it better than if they did . . . unless of course the station is Wemsley.

Misunderstanding through deafness lends itself readily to creating a humorous conflict of idea. Some theatre-goers may recall the charming little 'number' arranged by that exquisite artist, the late Chic Sale—may the earth lie light on him! Here were

four old fellows, all more or less deaf, sitting round out of doors, each busy with some little occupation of whittling or fixing tackle or something. One calls across to one of the others, in quite a loud voice with his hand to his ear: "*How would you like to go fishing to-day?*" The other with the same gesture but even a little louder calls back: "*I can't, I'm going fishing!*"

This has nothing whatever to do with words. I leave it to any bright young student of humor to analyse out just how and where the incongruity of ideas makes it laughable. That it *is* laughable, is proved by the way in which the audiences used suddenly to explode at it. *Res ipsa loquitur.*

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All of that by way of introduction so as to set up a preliminary notion of what is meant by the subject of this chapter. The general topic to be treated is that which is commonly indicated by such words as 'parody,' 'travesty,' 'burlesque,' 'imitation,' 'take-off,' etc. But these words obscure rather than elucidate the subject. Here, as in all else concerning humor, the field is so newly cleared and so little worked that appropriate implements are still wanting, and we possess no adequate terms. If we had to invent a single term to indicate the humorous juxtaposition of unrelated ideas made with a view to developing a new significance, we might suggest that of Analogies. We might go farther and be as brave as a biologist and invent a word. If he can call a new bug a *culex Thompson* we might fill this missing gap with the word Analogue, and define it with the phrase used above.

This lack of terms is an impediment because the use of cheap words for serious things conceals their worth. Such dilly-dilly terms as 'natural history,' 'the language of flowers,' etc., disguised a hundred years ago the reality of botany; and even 'botany' had to get out of the way for 'plant physiology.' When a great American university (beginning with C.) rechristened its course on Cooking as the Application of Heat on Food, and then led up to such terms as Dietetics and Calorifics, a wider range was opened for kitchen study. But think how hopeless are such words as 'take-off,' and 'imitation.' Even 'parody,' once a noble Greek word that meant 'a song on the side' (seeming to suggest just a song at twilight), is degraded by the fact that many parodies such as are made by clever school-children and belong to their time of life, are mere adaptations of new words to old texts, often of a very pointless kind. Hence the word 'parody' has lost caste. We talk of a thing as being a 'mere parody' of this or that, to mean that it utterly fails to be what it tries to be. A parody at its best is a brilliant form of criticism drawing attention to literary defects or philosophical fallacies in a way as legitimate or as exalted as a critical essay by a Sainte-Beuve or a Hippolyte Taine. Mr. Bob Benchley's treatment of Shakespeare,

as recorded below, ought to rank—if people had their deserts—with a discussion by Professor Dowden or Dr. Rolfè, yet we have no better designation for it than to call it a ‘parody’ of Shakespearian criticism.

There remains indeed the word ‘burlesque,’ but it has somehow acquired a rather different sense. To ‘burlesque’ anything means to make fun out of it, not of it; a burlesque version of a play merely means the treatment of the same theme in a comic way, not anything derogatory to the theme itself.

This lack of proper terms to designate their art, as felt by humorists, has been felt and remedied in other branches. Musicians long ago gave up such simple terms as ‘to play a piece on the fiddle,’ or ‘to play a tune on the piano’: they now ‘execute compositions,’ and ‘carry an aria’ or ‘interpret a prelude’ or words to that effect: and when they do it they do it ‘with brio,’ or ‘scherzando ma non troppo.’ But the humorist still has no better terms than to ‘write a take-off,’ or ‘make up a parody,’ or to ‘give an imitation,’ and so on. This cheapens his whole art in the literary sense. If Mr. Benchley’s critique of Shakespearian criticism, which is quoted below, were called a ‘risorgiment’ of Shakespeare written with no little ‘spoggio’ it would stand on a higher plane.

Before taking up detailed classes of ‘humor analogies,’ I will give one more general example calculated in my opinion to elucidate the ideas just explained.

Long ago before the War, when there used to be a Sultan of Turkey, it was found that the Sultan’s régime was out of touch with European civilization. Life in Turkey was uncertain, crime was widespread, commerce clogged with all sorts of obstructions and Christianity persecuted. In other words, it was like the world of to-day. But being thus ahead of his time, the Sultan was bombarded with protests and communiqués from the Great Powers; they threatened his existence and every now and then sent him an ‘ultimatum.’ The news of the day (a little went a long way then) thrilled with the latest ‘ultimatum,’ and when it appeared that the Sultan had again refused the ultimatum, civilization felt a throb of apprehension at what might happen next. But nothing ever did.

So it came about that a witty journalist wrote in an American paper the following paragraph:

## *THE REJECTED ULTIMATUM*

*OFFICIAL TEXT OF THE SULTAN’S ANSWER  
TO LORD SALISBURY*

*In finding himself compelled to reject this ultimatum the Sultan does not wish in any way to reflect on its literary merit. You will readily understand that it is not possible for the Sultan to make use of all the ultimatums which come into our office. We thus often find ourselves compelled to reject ultimatums in which we recognize very considerable talent. We assure you that if you care to send us any further ultimatums the Sultan will be very happy to receive and consider them. We are always looking for new talent in this direction. We re-enclose your ultimatum and beg to draw your attention to the fact that all ultimatums sent to this office should be accompanied by return postage.*

Now anybody who sees in that only a ‘parody’ of a newspaper rejection of manuscripts by turning it into the rejection of an ultimatum, or a parody vice versa, misses the point, or, at least, can’t express it. The analogy is full of meaning, full of satire of the hopelessness of active diplomacy against the *vis inertia* of Turkish immobility. A whole parliamentary harangue urging *action* and no more ultimatums, couldn’t say it better—not even Mr. Gladstone’s ‘bag and baggage’ denunciation of the Turk after the Bulgarian atrocities. Yet notice the kindness of it: one recalls Æsop’s fable of the wind and sun, contesting to see which first could compel the wayfarer to lay aside his coat. At the cold blast he drew it together: the warm sun soon had it off him. *Ex uno disce omnia.*

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Turning to the things called parodies, the simplest form, the kind that schoolboys write, is the Parody of Transcription of Names. It has no further significance than to take one person or set of persons and put them into a setting different from their usual one, more historic or exalted, or contrariwise, and so get an incongruous effect.

Let us make up an example: Take a poem with a lot of names of people in it. Shall we say, Macaulay’s *Lays of Ancient Rome*, *Item—Horatius*, the description of the fight at the bridge-head.

*Stout Lartius hurled down Aunus  
Into the stream beneath:  
Herminius struck at Seius,  
And clove him to the teeth.*

*etc. etc.*

Now shift the setting to a row as commonplace and sordid as the fight at the bridge is heroic and inspiring: get a set of names entirely incongruous and lacking in majesty of sound. Let us make it a fight of Irishmen in a Chicago bar-room:

*Steve Larkin hurled O'Hara  
Into the beer beneath:  
McGinnis struck O'Mara,  
And knocked out half his teeth.  
etc. etc.*

The process here shown may be exactly turned around, like putting a car into reverse gear or running a moving picture backward. Here the persons are exalted, but the situation and the language mean. Compare in the *Bon Gaultier Ballads* the account of how Queen Victoria kept high festival in Windsor's lordly hall:

*There drank the valiant Wellington, there fed the wary Peel,  
And at the bottom of the board Prince Albert carved the veal.*

Sometimes a parody seems to be a mere wanton destruction of the original, like the malicious smearing of paint over a beautiful picture. Consider the following once-well-known stanza of which the original needs no mention:

*The boy stood on the burning deck  
Eating peanuts by the peck.  
The flames rolled on, he would not go  
Because he loved the peanuts so.*

This is obviously without merit, or beauty or, at first sight, anything. How then could it come into being and be quoted? For this reason—imagine a person who has read and heard so much heroic poetry that he's sick of it; has heard too much of the roast beef and blue water stuff—the: "*Ho! mariners of England! Go weigh the vessel up! and sweep through the deep, with adamantine lips!*"

And, "*Toll for the brave, ten thousand fathoms down—*"

And, having read all this and having come to the boy on the burning deck, and having been asked at the end, "*The boy, oh, where was he?*" answers a little testily as above.

Compare similarly the statement that "*Mary had a little lamb, its feet were white as snow,*" and the innumerable suggestions made in similar rhyme to suggest other colors for the lamb and other places for it to go. These parodies are a revulsion against the over-sentimentality which saw in every baa-baa and every

piggy-wiggy a dear little tootsy-wootsy and forgot, or never knew, the simple realities of a barn-yard.

In other words, the parody is a protest against the over-sentimentality, or the over-reputation, of the original. The parody is the discord that follows and corrects a note too often struck. Thus the parody of this irreverent type played a special part in Victorian England when sentimentality in literature played a much greater part than it does now and needed more correction. The Victorians were a fine people of stout-hearted men and brave women capable of the heroism of Lucknow and of the sublime self-sacrifice of the *Birkenhead*; a God-fearing people who could believe anything and accept a miracle without an after-thought. But each virtue has its defects. They ran easily to sentiment, to what we call ‘sob-stuff’; in literature they loved death-scenes—small children preferred—paupers starving, barefooted Negroes in the snow, songs of a shirt, etc. They did nothing in particular to stop such sorrow. But they could have as good a time with it as an Irishman at a wake. We are otherwise. We struggle and fret to better society, yet we can’t believe anything except a slide-rule and a column of government statistics. So when it comes to literature we don’t want sob-stuff. We want bandits and yegg-men and -women with masks on who shoot people; in fact, the demand is greater than the supply. Soon we will want men with masks who shoot women. Soon literature will change sides at the bat like a cricket match and the crime will be the winning side, not virtue. All of this is a thousand miles from Little Nell, and Lord Jeffrey shedding floods of tears over Paul Dombey and thanking Dickens for turning them on.

So the Victorians needed parody. Without it their literature would have been a rank and weedy growth, over-watered with tears. A lot of their writing simply called aloud for parody. Consider:

*Little Anne and her mother were walking one day  
In London’s fair city so wide!*

What they did, I forget: some errand of mercy no doubt: they sound namby-pamby enough for it. Some of it would be all right, but there was such a lot of it. Just as the “Ho! mariners” was overhoe’d till even naval bravery was sickening, so the emotions of pity were over-watered with tears.

*Into the ward of the whitewashed walls  
Where the dead and the dying lay  
Wounded by bayonets, shells and balls,  
Somebody’s Darling was borne one day.*

This is the Crimea—the Scutari hospital. There is in it all the pain of war, all the infinite sorrow for the death of those still young. But the writer wants to work it to the last item. “*So young and so fair, wearing yet on his pale sweet face . . . kiss him once more for somebody’s sake . . . one bright lock from his forehead take. . . .*”

In other words, don’t neglect anything.

If boys and girls read that stuff without any counteractive, their minds would soften. Hence those of us who read it, unconsciously welcomed irreverent parody, just as people are glad to escape tears in a play by the re-entry of the comic butler. Somebody once fixed up *Somebody’s Darling* by using initials for phrases:—“*. . . wounded by B.S. and B.*” . . . “*wearing yet on his P.S.F.*,” etc. The effect is not bad: anyone irreverent enough can easily reconstruct it.

But the essential point is the use of parody as a corrective to over-sentiment, of humor as a relief from pain, of humor as a consolation against the shortcomings of life itself. This aspect rises larger on the horizon as our study proceeds.

This form of parody, to protest against sentiment, is not confined to verse. There are admirable examples of such ‘analogies’ as applied to over-sentimental prose of the same era. Everybody recalls still *Sandford and Merton*, a book rather earlier in date than the Victorian period, and the numerous parodies it has provoked. The same thing has been done again recently in Mr. Archibald Marshall’s *Birdikin Family*, a perfect model of literary restraint, the stumbling-block of all humorists. Those who try to make people laugh, necessarily get afraid that they may not see the point and won’t laugh, or won’t laugh enough. Hence the tendency to make the point sharper and the angle of vision wider, to respond to the cruel demand, ‘louder and funnier.’ But those who wish to qualify as writers of humor should learn to resist the tendency to overdo the method and over-sharpen the point. Never mind if others don’t see it: if you have it all to yourself that is Scotch humor of the highest kind.

Parodies of literary style, a class by themselves, are as old as literature; nor are they ever quite stale. If they have a legitimate use, it is not for the mere sake of imitation, as a glass is made to imitate a diamond. That is of no interest except to the person who does it. The true use is to render defects visible by heightening the colors to the point of visibility, as when iron warms towards white heat of intensity, or sounds rise to the pitch of audibility as is done by the thing called a siren, which starts from nothing. Hence a parody of style becomes an effective mode of criticizing style, often more rapid and effective than criticism itself.

Thus Mr. Cotter Morison in his book on Macaulay in the *English Men of Letters* series tells us that it was a characteristic fault of Macaulay to work up a long

string of elaborate periods each of which is cast as a sort of reminiscence of what future people are to remember or will remember, or ought to remember and to take care not to forget—"they will recall" . . . "they will remember" . . . "they will look back"—till the effect is tedious and the reader murmurs,

"Oh, I hope they will."

But it takes Mr. Morison a full page of quotations and about a page of print to explain it and the effect of the long quotations with recurrent italics to show the point, is very tiresome. Parody would be quicker; suppose it was brought up to date and done something as follows:

*"Let those who look back after years on the Coronation remember that the King was crowned: let them carry with them the undimmed remembrance of seeing the crown put on him: let them remember till their latest hour the sound made by the crown when it lit on him; let them remember till their dying day that it was the Archbishop of Canterbury and not the President of the United States who crowned him; and they will realize that after all this little spot is England."*

Prose parodies often go further and reproduce and exaggerate—and thus criticize—not only the style of the writer, his manner, so to speak, but his matter, the kind of story he writes, his typical characters and plot. Everyone recalls Thackeray's *Novels by Eminent Hands*. Equally typical and excellently well done are Bret Harte's *Condensed Novels*. It contains a story called *Lothaw*, a beautiful 'analogue' of Disraeli's *Lothair*. Here is Disraeli's snobbishness rebuked, by a description in *Lothaw* of the Duchess's daughters in the ducal drawing-room.

*"One dexterously applied gold knitting-needles to the fabrication of a purse of floss silk of the rarest texture, which none who knew the almost fabulous wealth of the Duke would believe was ever destined to hold in its silken meshes a less sum than £1,000,000 sterling.*

*Others occasionally burst into melody as they tried the passages of a new and exclusive air given to them in manuscript by some titled and devoted friend, for the private use of the aristocracy alone, and absolutely prohibited for publication."*

The same thing of course has been done over and over again, with more or less success. Among more recent compilations are those of 'Holworthy Hall,' *My Next Invitation*, and the clever French book *À la Manière de* by Messieurs Reboux and Muller. Sometimes the same method is extended from the treatment of a single author or book, to the treatment of a whole *genre* or class of stories. Such is, or is meant to be, the plan of the book called *Nonsense Novels* written by the present

writer twenty-five years ago, and still not dead, or not quite.

From fiction one turns to the similar treatment of history, though here the term 'travesty' might be substituted for parody. One thinks of such books as Bill Nye's *Comic History of the United States*, or the *Hustled History* of E. V. Lucas and C. L. Graves, and the recent and popular *1066 and All That*. Bill Nye's work was not on a high plane: such humor as it had rested chiefly on the contrast between the dignity of history and the lack of dignity of its narration.

This History is a hybrid product, an attempt to feed the youth of the country on its history and sandwich in enough comicality to render it palatable. It alternates from such sentences as: "*In five weeks Sherman had marched three hundred miles, had destroyed two railroads, had stormed Fort McAllister, and had captured Savannah,*" and—"Rienzi, Sheridan's horse, passed away at his home in Chicago at last in poverty while waiting for a pension applied for on the grounds of founder and lampers brought on by eating too heartily after the battle."

*Hustled History* is a delightful book. The reputation of its authors (understood to be so, though not appearing on the title-page), Mr. E. V. Lucas and Mr. C. L. Graves, guarantees it to be that. It is a presentation of the world's history as turned into newspaper 'news'—dispatches, editorials and stop-press items, with special articles in the style of well-known journalists of the hour. Here is an account of the Trojan War, including *Impressions of Helen of Troy by T. P.*, which begins, "*I have met many beautiful women in my time—Lola Montez, Piccolomini, the Empress Eugenie and Mrs. Eddy, to mention no other,*" etc. This is followed by an article on *Diseases of the Heel (apropos of the death of Achilles)* by C. W. Saleeby, M.D. From the nature of it the matter is ephemeral, but the *idea* is an inexhaustible mine of fun, with new veins waiting to be exploited.

By the same two authors and in the same method and delightful vein is the book, *If*, published in 1908. It rests on the idea of supposing that such and such should happen and seeing what would be the consequence. Suppose monarchs advertised? And forthwith we see in our mind's eye 'ads,' such as:

EDWARD VII

The peacemaker of Europe

---

Courts visited to order

---

*Ententes* cemented daily

The possibilities of this sort of thing are boundless, or bounded only by the limits of the author's genius. Of necessity much of the matter is ephemeral and dies with its day. People forget now about suffragettes, and the Sultan of Turkey, and Sandow, and find it hard to unravel *How to undress on £10,000 a year; or The Life of Maud Allen by the Venerable the Archdeacon of London*.

But no better parody of history was ever made than the delightful little volume entitled *1066 and All That*, published in 1930 and deservedly popular ever since. It is well worth studying as an illustration of the technique of humor of the kind treated in this chapter. The best way to appreciate its excellence is to imagine oneself trying to compose it and thus to realize the dangers and pitfalls of the task. How easily it could be made hopelessly tedious if it were repetition of the same trick on every page: if it became hopelessly silly and grotesque: if it never conveyed clever satire but always mere nonsense.

Observe, as a student of humor, the variety of the method. Here, first purely as a method of words, are *words* used out of their sense but in a sense suggested by their sound:—“*The Dames, accompanied by their sisters, or Sagas*” . . . “*older Britons called Druids, or Eistedfodds.*” . . .

Compare again words used with a slight alteration so that the new form conveys a satirical comment on the thing in question. Such is the renaming of the *Feudal System* as the *Futile System*, though I think it was once even better named many years before by a boy in one of my own classes at school as the *Fuddle System*.

At other times the fun is found in the sheer muddle of well-known facts into an utterly incongruous mixture. This method if over-used would have meant failure. But not being over-done it is delightful—thus, of Nelson, “*At one battle when he was told that his Admiral-in-chief had ordered him to cease fire, he put the telephone under his blind arm and exclaimed in disgust, ‘Kiss me, Hardy!’*”

Or this, purposely carried to the verge of exasperating silliness: “*Napoleon's armies always used to march on their stomachs shouting, ‘Vive l'intérieur.’*”

Here again are proper names altered without satire to another word amusingly similar but of quite different meaning: “*The Spanish Armadillo*” . . . “*The Puritans and the Mayfly*” . . . “*The Venomous Bead (author of the Rosary)*” . . . “*The Gorilla War in Spain*” . . . “*Most terrible among the Indians (of the Mutiny) was Banana Sahib.*”

The chief danger in the path of historical parody is to try to find ‘fun’ in the horrors and cruelties which form so large a part of the world's history. They must be far, far away indeed to be safe ground. Nothing can make the Spanish Inquisition funny, nor the torture chambers of the Middle Ages, or the hideous wife-murdering

of Henry VIII—“*a blot of blood and grease on the history of England*,” as Dickens called him. Nor could even Dickens find any fun in him. The authors of *1066 and All That* have mainly kept clear of this danger: but it would have been better not to parody the burning of Cranmer and Latimer. The reality is too awful and still too vivid. The same is true of the killing of Little Arthur by King John.

But the highest reach of humor attainable in this kind of work is where the parody of history is used to suggest the hidden truths of history. Thus, all the world wonders now whether the Great War ever need have been: it seems in retrospect so purposeless and so futile. Can this be better or more kindly suggested than in the statement, “*The Great War was between Germany and America and was thus fought in Belgium, one of the chief causes being the murder of the Austrian Duke of Sarajevo by a murderer in Servia*”?

A further word should be said about comic history, not as humor but as history. One is speaking here of education, not of fun, and in this connection comic history has its noxious aspect. It is all right for people who know history already and get their amusement out of a satirical presentation of it. It is all wrong for those who don't. To learn history out of a comic manual is to debase and injure, perhaps for good, one's sense of the realities of the past. Parents, please take notice.

Moving up one degree in dignity and significance, we pass from the parodies of history to the parodies of criticism, literary or historical. The merit of success here is greater because there is a preponderance of the higher motive of correcting error over the lower motive of having fun.

Let us consider Shakespeare. I have, in other writings, often drawn attention to what seems to me the abundant silliness of Shakespearian criticism. It always seems to me that it tries to ascribe to Shakespeare not only excellencies that he never possessed, but forms of art to which he never aspired and a range of omniscience that he never had. All of this is based on evidence that wouldn't even convict a horse-thief in Idaho. I place here, *si licet parva componere magnis*—a sample of an attempt of my own to satirize by means of humor the exaggerations and the method of the Shakespearian critic:

1. *LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE. We do not know when Shaksper was born nor where he was born. But he is dead.*

*From internal evidence taken off his works after his death we know that he followed for a time the profession of a lawyer, a sailor and a scrivener and he was also an actor, a bar-tender and an ostler. His wide experience of men and manners was probably gained while a bar-tender. (Compare Henry V, Act V, Scene 2, “Say now, gentlemen, what shall yours be?”)*

*But the technical knowledge which is evident upon every page shows also the intellectual training of a lawyer: (Compare Macbeth, Act VI, Scene 4, "What is there in it for me?") At the same time we are reminded by many passages of Shakspeare's intimate knowledge of the sea. (Romeo and Juliet, Act VIII, Scene 14. "How is her head now, nurse?")*

*We know, from his use of English, that Shagsper had no college education.*

But the same thing is done in a far more detailed and convincing way by Mr. Robert C. Benchley in an essay entitled *Shakespeare Explained* in his book *Of All Things*. The desire to place Mr. Benchley's work prominently before the student of humor may serve as the apology for a quotation a little disproportionate in length to the width of the point. Of all contemporary writers none excel Robert Benchley in the ingenious technique of verbal humor. All that a Harvard training could do for him has been fully utilized in making fun of it. As a writer of nonsense for nonsense' sake, without after-thought or sobs, he is unsurpassed. It is only occasionally that he lapses into serious purpose as in the following extract, a satirical protest against the 'scholarly' footnote, a form of gout by which scholars debilitate the body of literature.

*Shakespeare Explained*  
*Carrying on the System of Footnotes to a*  
*Silly Extreme*  
**PERICLES**  
**ACT II SCENE 3**

*Enter first Lady-in-Waiting (Flourish,<sup>1</sup> Hautboys<sup>2</sup> and<sup>3</sup> torches<sup>4</sup>).*  
*First Lady-in-Waiting—What<sup>5</sup> ho!<sup>6</sup> Where<sup>7</sup> is<sup>8</sup> the<sup>9</sup> music<sup>10</sup>?*

NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Flourish: *The stage direction is obscure. Clarke claims it should read "flarish" thus changing the meaning of the passage to "flarish" (that is, the King's), but most authorities have agreed that it should remain "flourish," supplying the predicate which is to be flourished. There was at this time a custom in the countryside of England to flourish a mop as a signal to the passing vendor of berries, signifying that in that particular household there was a consumer-demand for berries, and this may have been meant in this instance. That Shakespeare was cognizant of this custom of flourishing the mop for berries is shown in a similar passage in the second part of King Henry*

IV, where he has the Third Page enter and say, "Flourish." Cf. also Hamlet, IV, 7, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Hautboys, from the French Haut, meaning "high" and the Eng. boys, meaning "boys." The word here is doubtless used in the sense of "high boys," indicating either that Shakespeare intended to convey the idea of spiritual distress on the part of the First Lady-in-Waiting or that he did not. Of this Rolfe says: "Here we have one of the chief indications of Shakespeare's knowledge of human nature, his remarkable insight into the petty foibles of this workaday world." Cf. T.N. 4: 6, "Mine eye hath play'd the painter, and hath stell'd thy beauty's form in table of my heart."

But these parodies, or analogues, or adaptations or whatever one wishes to call them, can move upon a higher plane than any yet indicated. This is where some scene or narrative of the past is rewritten into the setting and language of the present, not for the laughter that lies in the contrast but for the saddened smile that arises from reflection on what the lapse of time has done. The idea is best illustrated from an example, for which one may well take John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's re-adaptation of it as the *Celestial Railway*.

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is itself an 'allegory,' a sort of adaptation. It converts the journey of the ordinary wayfarer with its difficulties, its bad roads, its sloughs and its temptations towards loitering by the way, into a journey towards spiritual grace. Christian sets out on his pilgrimage, his eyes steadfast on the goal. He turns aside from the sophisms of Mr. Worldly Wiseman, the threats of the Giant Despair; he escapes alike the dangers of the Slough of Despond and the temptations of Vanity Fair, and in the end is welcomed to the Holy City.

Bunyan did not mean to be funny: and in this intention he succeeded absolutely. Yet the technique often runs close to that of humor; when Dickens and Thackeray christen such people as Lord Verisoft and Lady Jane Sheepshanks, we laugh. Bunyan introduces us to Mr. Worldly Wiseman and Pliable—we don't. Yet the appeal, especially to the minds of children, is much the same. Bunyan adds to this pleasing feeling of make-believe that marvellous power of narration seen in such writers as don't try to narrate—Xenophon and Julius Cæsar.

Now what Nathaniel Hawthorne wanted to do was to contrast Bunyan's simple, pious world of the seventeenth century, primitive in its life and earnest in its effort, with his own earlier nineteenth-century world, roaring with new inventions, marvels of machinery and able to offer to its pilgrims the new advantage of a celestial railway.

What we think nowadays of either of their worlds is another matter. What Hawthorne meant was that mechanical civilization was threatening to undermine the moral worth of humanity: better to walk sturdily on foot than be hurled Heaven knows where in a steam train. He could have written all this out as an essay, and conveyed it to a few hundred readers. He wrote it as a humorous ‘parody’ and reached thousands. A single brick will not show us a whole house, but it tells a good deal about it: so a single sentence or two from Hawthorne can give us a good idea of his aim and method.

*“‘Pouh, pouh! you are obtuse!’ said Mr. Smooth-it-way, with a hearty laugh. ‘Don’t you know Apollyon, Christian’s old enemy, with whom he fought so fierce a battle in the Valley of Humiliation? He was the very fellow to manage the engine; and so we have reconciled him to the custom of going on pilgrimage, and engaged him as chief engineer.’ . . . The passengers being all comfortably seated, we now rattled away merrily, accomplishing a greater distance in ten minutes than Christian probably trudged over in a day. It was laughable, while we glanced along, as it were, at the tail of a thunderbolt, to observe two dusty foot-travellers in the old pilgrim guise. . . . Indeed, such are the charms of the place (the Celestial City) that people often affirm it to be the true and only heaven; stoutly contending that there is no other; that those who seek farther are mere dreamers. . . . The reverend clergy are nowhere held in higher respect than at Vanity Fair. . . . I need only mention the names of the Rev. Mr. Shallow-deep, the Rev. Mr. Stumble-at-truth, that fine old clerical character the Rev. Mr. This-to-day, who expects shortly to resign his pulpit to the Rev. Mr. That-to-morrow; together with the Rev. Mr. Bewilderment, the Rev. Mr. Clog-the-spirit, and, last and greatest, the Rev. Mr. Wind-of-doctrine.”*

One may contrast with Hawthorne’s *Celestial Railway*, and his reverence through irreverence, the somewhat similar type found in the Negro Bible stories as they pass current in ‘the South.’ Many people entirely fail to understand or appreciate them because they have had no chance to do so. They mistake them for irreverence, for travesties of the Scripture, for blasphemy. In reality they are nothing of the sort; indeed they are the contrary. The Negro was and is a believer. For him there was and is no higher criticism, no relativity of history, no distinction of past from present. He took the Bible stories just as he found them, reverently and simply. He couldn’t read and write and so he passed them on by word of mouth, and a person with a natural gift of imagery, such as primitive people often have, could tell them in a striking way to an open-mouthed group of auditors. Naturally and unconsciously he put in the scenery and setting not of Judæa or Canaan but of

Georgia and Mississippi: naturally and unconsciously he turned the Holy Land into plantations, and the ‘Lawd’ into a Southern planter. Here is an extract from the opening of such a Bible story as I once heard it told, before the New York stage and the publishers had yet exploited this field. “*It happened,*” said the narrator, “*that de Lawd and de angel Gabriel was walking froo’ de Garden of Eden, jus’ about sundown. An’ there, right on de groun’ in front of dem was some queer-looking tracks. De Lawd stood still an’ put de butt-end of his gun on de groun’, ‘What’s dis?’ says he . . .*” etc.

Now notice how simple, one might say how sweet this is. A Southern planter walking round in the woods, would of course carry a gun with him. So the darky narrator took for granted that a man as high up as the ‘Lawd’ would of course carry a gun. And the beauty of it is that his auditors wouldn’t see anything queer, anything laughable about it. ‘De Lawd put de butt of his gun on the ground’—of course, why not? He wanted to talk. Later on, when the play *Green Pastures* and Mr. Roark Bradford’s *Ol’ Man Adam and His Chillun* (1928) developed this vein, there was wide misunderstanding. Properly read there is a great beauty in such narrative. It has a kind wistful primitiveness that carries us back to our nursery days when angels played on harps. Thus when old man Noah warned by the ‘Lawd’ started to build an ark, he built it as they would build it on the Yazoo River in the flood area of Mississippi.

“*Dis gonter be a side-wheeler, ain’t hit, paw? Sort of like de Stacy Adams?’ say Ham.*

“*Stern-wheeler, like de Grace,’ say Noah. ‘Only bigger. Us wants room, not fancy stuff.—You, Shem! Tote dat planed lumber up on de texas deck. Rough lumber goes on de main deck.’*

“*So Noah and Ham and Shem and Japhet hammered and sawed away, out on de hillside, a mile from de river. And purty soon somebody hyars de hammerin’ and sa’nters up to ax Noah what he doin’.*

“*Buildin’ you a house, is you, Noah?’ say a man.*

“*Nawp,’ say Noah. ‘I’s buildin’ a ark.’*

“*Well, whyn’t you build hit by de river so hit’ll float?’ say de man.*

“*Who buildin’ dis ark?’ say Noah. ‘Me or you?’”*

## *Chapter IV* *THE HUMOR OF SITUATION*

From the narrower ground of the expression of humor in artifices of words and verbal combinations, we pass to the wider field of humor in situation and character. The one is like a cultivated garden: the other like a broad natural landscape. At first all seems confusion; but just as a surveyor measures a landscape into lines and contours, so we can measure and analyse the field of humor. The surveyor's chart somehow knocks the beauty out of the landscape. So perhaps does ours. The price paid for knowledge is the loss of the eye of innocence. Very likely we enjoy things better if we don't know too much about them. I have often noticed that music seems to give great pain to people really musical and that an art gallery irritates an artist. "When science from creation's face enchantment's veil withdraws," so sang somebody, "what lovely visions yield their place to cold material laws." So it may be that the deliberate analysis of a joke changes it from a mysterious reality to a jack-in-the-box artificiality. But it doesn't matter much. We may go on.

We can begin by using examples to show the kind of thing meant by the humor of situation. Educationists tell us that this is the real way to learn—from the concrete to the abstract. Articles and books on humor are apt to resolve themselves into a series of jokes and stories, or to take on all the appalling dullness of undiluted theory. The happy mean is hard to find. But in the present case a story shows so quickly what is meant that it is worth a page of theory.

Take this one. At a ball one night a lady came to her husband and beckoned him aside and said, "John, you've managed somehow to rip your trousers at the back of the leg. Come with me and we'll find a quiet room. I've a needle and thread and I can mend them in no time." They found a quiet room and the husband removed his trousers and stood patiently in his shirt-tail while his wife was mending the trousers. Just then they heard people coming. "Good Heavens!" said the lady, "get in behind that cupboard door and I'll stand in front and see that nobody can get by."

The man dived through the door and his wife held it. A moment later she heard his frantic voice on the other side, "Let me back. I'm in the ballroom."

Now observe that this story does not depend for its humor on any particular form of words. It could be told in a thousand ways. It is almost foolproof in the telling.

Not even a club bore could quite kill it, though he would spin it out till it wore pretty thin. The interesting point in theory is to notice that the humor arises from the *situation*, not the words, not the people; and not character—they haven't any. The

situation involves exactly the elements discussed in the preliminary analysis of humor; a sudden juxtaposition of incongruities—the bright publicity of a ballroom and the entire privacy of being in one’s shirt-tail: exultation over the disaster of the man concerned, with a relieving sense that it won’t hurt him. If he opened what he thought was a cupboard door and fell downstairs and broke his neck, that would be very funny to a Potawatami Indian, but not to us.

Try one or two more. Here is a story which I read a few years ago as an actuality reported in a Montana newspaper, and which carries with it all the truthfulness that goes with Montana.

A young man cleaned his evening suit for a dance by rubbing it all over with nitric acid. The suit was thin and much worn and a little greasy. So what he had really done, though he didn’t know it, was to turn himself into nitroglycerine. At the dance as soon as the heat of the room fully reached him, his suit blew up and left him like a singed chicken.

Here, as a supreme example, is a story told by Sir Henry Lucy of his friend Canon Ainger. The canon, very fond of children, was invited to a children’s party. On his arrival, the servant was about to show him into a room where the buzz of voices indicated company. “Don’t announce me!” said the reverend gentleman. Then, to get the full fun out of his entry, he put himself on all fours, threw his coattails over his head, pushed the door open and came crawling into the room making a noise like a horse. Hearing no children’s laughter, he looked up. He had come to the wrong house. This was a dinner-party.

Here again the humor is not dependent on any special form of wording: nor on character, except in a general way. ‘Canon Ainger’ becomes a general term for ‘reverend gentlemen’: the Archbishop of Canterbury would do just as well.

The humor of situation arises, therefore, out of any set of circumstances that involve discomfiture or disaster of some odd incongruous kind, not connected with the ordinary run of things and not involving sufficient pain or disaster to over-weigh the pleasures of contemplating this incongruous distress: or it may arise without any great amount of personal discomfiture when the circumstances themselves are so incongruous as to involve a sort of paradox. One and the same principle runs through it all, as it does through all humor, the idea of the ‘thing smashed out of shape,’ the comic broken umbrella spoken of above. If a college of humor were ever established, it should make its coat of arms of such emblems as a broken umbrella, and its professors should wear little pill-box hats like clowns. Even at that, however, the shock of surprise once gone, the little hat would appear as grave and dignified as a ‘mortar board,’ a thing really shaped to fry eggs in. So much does custom color

judgment.

Humor of situation—discomfiture, incongruity—could be traced back to the earliest forms of what we call ‘horseplay.’ The logical succession would run from injury to ‘horseplay,’ and from that to practical jokes and ‘playing a trick’ on someone. Apollo, we are told in Greek mythology, having had a controversy with Marsyas in regard to music, skinned him alive and hung up his skin in a cave; in other words he ‘took the hide off him.’ This was crude stuff to which musicians of to-day would not stoop. A degree further up appears the rough and boisterous brutality that passed for primitive fun. In Longfellow’s *Hiawatha* we read of Pau-Puk-Keewis (Canto XVI), apparently the first American story-teller:

*From his lodge went Pau-Puk-Keewis,  
Came with speed into the village,  
Found the young men all assembled  
In the lodge of old Iagoo,  
Listening to his monstrous stories,  
To his wonderful adventures.*

In the next canto we hear what happened to Pau-Puk-Keewis when Hiawatha got hold of him. Apollo with Marsyas had nothing on Hiawatha—the chase of Pau-Puk-Keewis ending in the finale “with their clubs they beat and bruised him, pounded him as maize is pounded” is as close to fun as Hiawatha ever got.

Next to these two stages, the mythological and primitive, can be set what we might call a mediæval, the rough horseplay that passed for diversion in the Middle Ages—ducking people in ponds, and other merry tricks of the sort. This was humor of action, not of literature, but it expressed itself in words in the mediæval drama that was springing into being as a sort of humorous derivative of a church show. Here originated also all such habits and practices as initiating apprentices, and new boys at school, or the antics of Father Neptune in ducking people in a tub of water when a ship crossed the line. In *Ralph Roister Doister* (a play written probably about 1553), we see the same idea translated into written comedy. Ralph, coveting a rich marriage with Dame Constance, makes a grand assault upon her house, and is put to rout by her maids.

It is interesting to see how the elements of gravity and humor intertwine and alternately separate and come together again. Mankind has a tendency towards either direction. Bring into being such a thing as a Rotation Club, or Elks, or an Astronomical Society and it will move, as it were, both ways at once. The Rotation Club will begin naming its officers Grand Masters and First Emperors, Second

Satrap, and such: the less it knows of Greek, the more it will use it. At the same time it will keep breaking down—or rising up—into fun. It is this tendency which accounts for the continuous element of horseplay, discomfiture, drubbing and ducking which runs down our literature like a strand in a rope. The tendency is stimulated by the need, or at least the demand, in the drama at any rate, for ‘comic relief,’ the protection afforded by laughter against tears, by amusement against horror. To what extent the ‘comic relief’ is a sound principle of art is a question. The Greek drama, the tragedies, knew nothing of it. The Greeks liked to ‘take it straight’ just as people in Kentucky never dilute their whisky. The Greek notion of a tragedy was that once it began it never stopped: it went on at the same place and in the same continuous duration till it was all over. Similarly when the Greeks wanted comedy they sat down to laugh, not to cry. But the major tendency in the development of literature and drama for two thousand years has been towards the dual aspect, this Janus mask of tears and laughter. Shakespeare in his grimmest scenes has funny people. Graziano is there to take the agony out of Antonio’s approaching dissection, and Lancelot Gobbo comes on and off as a tear-mop.

Many of our games originated in whole or in part out of this humor of discomfiture. There were in them certain elements that came from elsewhere, for example the development of skill and dexterity arising out of the need of learning to fight, and the element of gambling, meaning trying to get something for nothing, a tendency as old as humanity itself. But games like Blindman’s Buff, and Hunt the Slipper are games of humorous discomfiture: as opposed to boxing, which was a derivative that came down from murder, and chess which rose up from gambling (on squares) to mathematics.

When you get to the days of Scott and Dickens and the Victorian novel, the funny people and the serious people, the crying people and the laughing people come off and on in regular alternation like Box and Cox or the two Cuckoos of a Swiss clock. It was this rapid confusion of alternating tears and laughter which led the vociferous French critic Jules Janin to make (1842) his famous denunciation of the art of Charles Dickens,—“*a mass of childish inventions in which everything that is horrible alternates with everything that is simple: here pass, in a flood of tears, people so good that they are absolutely silly: further on, rushing round and blaspheming, are all sorts of robbers, crooks, thieves and paupers, so repulsive that one cannot conceive how any society containing them can last for twenty-four hours. It is the most sickening mixture you can imagine of hot milk and sour beer, of fresh eggs and salt beef, rags and embroidered coats, gold sovereigns and penny pieces, roses and dandelions. They fight, they kiss*

*and make it up, they swear at one another, they get drunk, they die of starvation. Do you like stale tobacco, garlic, the taste of fresh pork and the noise of a tin pan beaten against a cracked copper saucepan? Then try to read this last book of Dickens.”*

When we reach the ‘melodrama’—the ‘ten-twenty-thirty’ that grew out of the Victorian literature—comic relief has become a convention, rigid as a frame. The hero of a play has reached, let us say, the very acme of tragedy—as when the *Silver King* (anno domini about 1880) lifts up his hands and exclaims, “Oh God! turn back the Universe and give me yesterday!” We know that the moment he makes his exit, in will come the ‘comic coachman’ or the ‘comic butler’ with a ‘comic tag’—“Now, then, this wy (way) for Paddington,” or some such gag, funny only by its repetition, and the house goes into a roar.

We have the same thing to-day in the slightly different form of a ‘mixed program.’ The Grand Guignol Theatre of Paris is the chosen home of horror, undiluted while it lasts. They will put on a lynching scene in a way to make a Negro glad to get back to Mississippi. In their little theatre people are burnt alive, die of thirst on rafts and fall dead from fright in mausoleums. The mortality is very high. But in between the deaths, short intervals of convulsive merriment relieve the strain. No Guignol could be for ever ‘grand.’

The moving picture has fully taken over the convention. The muse Cinematographia is the sunken sister of the arts, beautiful but wicked. She will do anything for money. Hence she mixes up tears and laughter as a barmaid mixes a gin fizz: all she wants to know is, not what the public wants or needs, but what the public will pay for. This is not to say a word against such a situation: in the long run the world must live or die on what it is and what it wants and what it will pay for. You can’t control it from above, and if you could you would have first to be very sure which direction was above and which was below. Government control of art, in that sense, can’t live: it would end in a stagnation like that of China. In the old days when art was the art of a single man—who made up a song or painted a picture and needed only a bit of paper, or not even that, all was different. Art for art’s sake could follow its own prompting. But the huge machine apparatus of the ‘pictures’ and the ‘radio’ are an utterly different case. Hence we find them taking over without question the ‘mixed program’ idea, the mingling of tragedy and fun, of wisdom and foolishness. “The public,” I once heard a moving picture authority say, “won’t stand for more than a thousand feet of education in one evening.”

All of this discussion, I must not say digression, has been intended to bring out the point of the ‘humor of situation,’ or, if we like, of ‘situation-humor’ as a

recurrent, a continuous element in the development of the world's literature. One turns again to the main thread of the argument to speak of the 'practical joke' as a parallel development. This too comes down from the ages, losing, as it comes, its earlier brutality. Compare with Apollo's joke on Marsyas when he took his hide off, the jokes of Till Eulenspiegel. This name is that of a legendary German peasant joker of the fourteenth century who went about the country playing pranks. He may, or may not, have existed, but his tricks were gathered together into a sort of chap-book printed and reprinted for generations. He was thus, as it were, the Homer of the practical joke. He is said to have died about 1350, probably of the Black Death which thus had its brighter side and was not as black as it was painted. Till's pranks were played against all classes, priests, noblemen, inn-keepers, good and bad indifferently. There was no Robin Hood about him. Yet dimly he stands for the revolt, the upheaval of the peasant, serf and villein class, by the economic changes of the day, against nobles and townspeople. We see here, with hushed reverence, the beginning of the influence of the 'people.' "Till's pranks," says a biographer, "were often pointless, more often brutal." He is a long way from the pleasing rascality of Molière's Scapin or of Dickens's Alfred Jingle.

Here is one of the more respectable and presentable of Till Eulenspiegel's tricks. Till happened to meet a group of blind beggars who held out their hands to ask for alms. "Here, my good fellows," said Till, making a clink of money but giving none, "are twenty florins. Go into the inn over there and dine and this will pay for it." The blind beggars, deeply grateful, hurriedly stumped into the hotel, each thinking another had the money. A sumptuous dinner was eaten but when the time came to pay for it, the blind men were beaten up by the enraged landlord.

It is said that this story is the origin of the phrase 'blind man's dinner.'

Contrast with this an American version which has floated down the stream of literature to the journals of to-day, shaking out the dirt of cruelty as it moved; as follows:

A man of benevolent appearance and quiet dress collected on the street half a dozen little boys of assorted sizes, invited them all to come and have a nice dinner in a restaurant. The dinner was ordered and eaten with great gaiety. As it got near the end, the host beckoned to the waiter and said, "Give the boys some ice-cream and coffee, and I'll run across to my office and be back by the time they've finished." He left amid grateful bows and smiles from the management. When he failed to return in half an hour, the proprietor came to the table and said, "Where is your father's office, boys, and I'll telephone to him?" "He ain't our father," chorused the children. "He just asked us in for a feed."

Now here there is no brutality. No one imagines the little creatures getting 'beaten up,' though no doubt Till Eulenspiegel would think that the best ending. Even the landlord has lost nothing but a little food. The pleasing ingenuity—which lies in the juxtaposition of the incongruous—a fond father feeding his children and a crook getting a free dinner, excites our sense of humor.

It is this element of the comic rogue which runs all through the so-called picaresque romance, the mixed rambling adventures of a Francion or, in dramatic form the 'fourberies' of a Scapin. It helps, as will be developed later, to convert the humor of situation into the humor of character, or rather it begins to combine the two. Even to-day we find it in actual life when criminality, entirely dissociated from cruelty and suffering and not directed against the poor, often excites a laugh for its sheer ingenuity. I remember one actual case of the ingenious theft of a clock from a mantelpiece of the lounge of a large Canadian hotel in broad daylight at a time when it was full of people coming and going. A man entered the room, as if he knew exactly what he was doing, carrying a large sheet of paper and various small apparatus. He went over to the clock, lifted it two or three feet aside and measured the wall behind it with a tape, entering the measurements in a book. Then he spread out the paper on the floor, wrapped the clock up in it and walked away with the clock. He had stolen it.

One must not, however, be too pious about the humor of our age. Even now perhaps we can still appreciate a Till Eulenspiegel story, though it has to have with it some special saving grace. Let the student consider this example, at once modern and mediæval. The scene is laid in Chicago, the home and hearth of hold-ups, forty years ago. It became at that period the practice of certain thugs to hang round the old Dearborn Station, out of which led dark and shut-in railway tracks, to wait till a likely looking victim appeared, with 'farmer' written all over him. When he found the right man, the thug would come running past the farmer and call to him, "Come on down the track! There's a whole carload of wheat bust and it's all over the track." The farmer would start at a run and when he got down far enough among the box cars, the thug sandbagged him, took his money and came back to wait for another. The humor of the story lies in the peculiarity of the bait: a car of grain! A farmer who has just come in from a grain farm to see the sights of the city will take a run to look for grain! So we get the effect that the thug did not catch just one farmer, but caught farmers just as people catch fish. Now if it had been a professor, the thug would have called, "Come on down the track! There's a first edition of Confucius fallen off a flat car!"

Of common parentage with Till Eulenspiegel and the comic rogue is the more

modern ‘practical joke.’ It is amazing now to realize how dead and gone is the practical joke as compared with its extraordinary vogue of a hundred years ago. “The Prince Regent,” says Agnes Repplier (*In Pursuit of Laughter*), “loved practical jokes. They reached the level of his intelligence. When King he played one on the old Duke of Norfolk plying him with drink at table, driving him round and round the Pavilion lawn at Brighton when he thought he was returning to Arundel and finally tucking him into a Pavilion bed where he awakened in the morning.”

In the same book we are reminded of Theodore Hook (1788-1841) who left a meteoric track in the sky of Georgian England, followed, as meteors are, by complete darkness. Hook was a writer of ballads and comic operas, a mimic, was treasurer for a while of the Island Mauritius, had a close shave of prison for stealing the Island’s funds, was a magazine writer and editor, a prisoner for debt for two years and left behind him nearly fifty volumes of *Sayings and Doings*, squibs, stories and sketches, or rather, he took them away with him, for there is no trace of them now. In this eccentric setting he developed a phenomenal propensity for practical jokes. On the street one day (Berners Street) he pointed out to a friend a neat but inconspicuous house. “I’ll lay you a guinea,” he said, “that in a week I’ll make that house the most conspicuous in London.” To win the bet Hook sent letters (four thousand, so it is said) to four thousand tradesmen ordering for the Berners Street address inconceivable quantities of coal, wine, books, potatoes—anything. Then he summoned all kinds of exalted personages to go to the house on all kinds of pretexts—the Lord Mayor of London to take a death-bed statement, the Commander-in-Chief, the Bishop of London, the head of the East India Company—on various convincing appeals. The street was blocked. Rows and fights started. Several horses were killed. Hook enjoyed it all from a side window.

The literary counterpart of the practical joke is what some may call the ‘humor of discomfiture’ which flourished mightily in England in the Georgian era and even when Dickens and Queen Victoria came to the throne, still blossomed unchecked. This turns upon the blunders and misadventures and minor miseries of which the characters concerned are the perpetual victims. The laugh is at their ineptitude and distress. Their misfortunes are never serious and never permanent or the fun would be out of it. This basis of discomfiture, as all students of Charles Dickens’s works know, was to have been the original idea of the *Pickwick Papers*. So at least were the ‘papers’ vaguely planned by the publishers and the first drawings made by the unhappy suicide Seymour. “There was a notion,” wrote Dickens afterwards, “of a Nimrod Club the members of which were to go out shooting, fishing and so forth and getting themselves into difficulty by their lack of dexterity.” Dickens, not being a

sportsman, altered the plan to a travelling club, but Mr. Winkle and his opening adventures are part of the original plan. Probably it would not have gone far. As it was, the *Pickwick Papers* had a close shave of collapse. But Dickens had unconsciously opened the gate of a new and wonderful garden in which he presently moved about, unconscious of art or plan.

As I have elsewhere written, "The banging guns of the rook-shooting, the balking horses and the awkward riders were soon forgotten and left behind. Mr. Pickwick and his friends are carried away on the flood-tide of life." It was this change from the original humor of discomfiture to the larger humor of character which altered Mr. Pickwick from an amiable nincompoop to a genial philanthropist, and Mr. Winkle from a zany to a gentleman. Dickens, with the childish egotism of genius, always bitterly resented any imputation of this, yet the change is there. Indeed, Mr. Pickwick almost goes into 'reverse gear' to become 'Foxy Grampa,' a pictured character who delighted children two generations later.

But even as it is, the *Pickwick Papers*, especially in the earlier chapters, contain a good deal of the humor of discomfiture apart from the question of the Nimrod idea of awkwardness at sport. An excellent example is found in the scene where Mr. Pickwick and his friends get mixed up in the tumult and parade of a military review at Chatham. "*We are in a capital situation,*" said Mr. Pickwick. *He had hardly uttered the word when the whole half-dozen regiments levelled their muskets as if they had but one common object and that object the Pickwickians, and burst forth with the most awful and tremendous discharge that ever shook the earth to its centre, or an elderly gentleman off his. . . . A hoarse shout of command ran along [the line], and the whole of the half-dozen regiments charged at double quick time down upon the very spot where Mr. Pickwick and his friends were stationed. . . .*" After which the Pickwickians to complete their discomfiture are caught between two lines of conflicting troops, and Mr. Pickwick is rolled over upside down.

Nor have blunders and discomfiture even now faded out of the foreground of written humor, where they still play a certain part as an admixture or ingredient no longer the main element. It is the difference between a horn of brandy and brandy with Christmas pudding.

In America also the humor of discomfiture filled a considerable place during the same period though it was never the leading feature of the famous 'American humor' of those whom one might reverently call the 'old masters'—Mark Twain and such. But it flourished as a lesser form of humor much in vogue at popular readings and school entertainments. In such a typical book as *The Blunders of a Bashful Man*,

we have, as with Mr. Pickwick and Foxy Grampa, a sort of reverse gear of the comic rogue business. The comic rogue gets ahead of everybody and always wins out. The 'bashful man' is always in discomfiture and always the victim.

In American humor of the hour the discomfiture business plays but little part except where combined into those quick-fire verbal effects which make up the new tabloid humor. In the United States a tale of woe must be short and snappy if it is to get listeners. An example from a contemporary source:

A judge, noted for his gentleness to defendants, asked the contrite and broken man before him, “*Have you ever been sentenced to imprisonment?*”

“*No, your Honor, ’said the prisoner, and burst into tears.*”

“*There, there, don’t cry, ’said the judge. ‘You’re going to be now.’*”

Here is another type:

“*The farm youths of the Vermont countryside are of great strength. If a wagon is stuck fast in the mud, a young farmer by putting his shoulder against the wheel and giving one good heave, can easily break his shoulder bone.*”

Another (with apologies for technical language): “*The ball game in Jones’s cow-pasture last Saturday afternoon ended in violent altercation when William Van Nostrand, a visitor from the city, took a long body slide into what he had understood to be third base.*” To people who do not understand about baseball and cow-pastures, always rough with stones, it may be explained that Van Nostrand in making his ‘body slide’ must inevitably have hit a stone.

A milder shade of the humor arising out of discomfiture is found in the humor of confusion. The humor here turns on incongruities arising out of ‘a mix-up,’ a misunderstanding or a mistake in identity. In its simplest forms this is as old as literature appearing in the mythologies and the farces of the Middle Ages and the *Thousand and One Nights* of Arabia. It turns to either comedy or tragedy. The King mistaken for a beggar or a beggar for a King, is a primitive thing that never ends. But in modern humor much higher effects are got than in the mere humor of misadventure. Mistaken identity, in one form or other, has been the chief motives of some of the greatest comic success of modern literature and the modern stage. One thinks of the immortal *Charlie’s Aunt*. Here the fun turns on a university undergraduate being driven by stress of circumstance (viz. to supply a chaperone for an otherwise unaccountable girl) to dress up as his fellow-student’s (Charlie’s) aunt. Exquisite also is the confusion of persons in the delightful little drama *The Man from Blankley’s* by F. Anstey (the late Anstey Guthrie) published about fifty years ago in *Punch*. In this case a guest arriving at a dinner-party and going to the wrong house is assumed by his hostess to be a young man whom she had engaged (unseen) from the

universal provider Blankley to fill the place of a missing guest. Anyone can see at once the delightful possibilities—the whispered asides as to what he may eat and drink, etc.

These mistaken or double identities and so on can be used for other purposes, for romantic adventure, as in Mr. Oppenheim's *Great Impersonation*, as in the grim tragedy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or the mysticism of Jerome K. Jerome's *Passing of the Third Floor Back*. Students of literature will observe how easily the Jekyll-Hyde idea might have occurred to Robert Louis Stevenson as a funny concept (although it didn't), and in its execution might have later turned serious. Thus again and again one realizes that the humor conception and the serious conception are just the two Janus faces of the same truth.

Ever so many jokes and funny stories turn on people being mistaken for someone, or something, else. One of the best in the world, too familiar to bear citation, is the story of the man who by mistake was 'put off at Buffalo.' Another—told of any great comedian from Coquelin to Chic Sale—is the story of how a melancholy-looking man, consulting a doctor, was told that what he needed was not medicine, but cheering up. "Go and see Coquelin this evening and have a good laugh." The man shook his head, "I am Coquelin," he said.

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It will be realized that in all these cases of humor arising out of situation, the particular character of the persons concerned does not enter, or only in a secondary degree. The man without his trousers in the ballroom is just 'the man.' Till Eulenspiegel's blind victims were just blind men. Theodore Hook's joke only needs a bishop (any bishop, size and age indifferent), a commander-in-chief (of anything) and so on. At best the characters are 'stock characters'—a 'witty abbé,' an 'old maid,' an 'Anglo-Indian colonel,' a 'club-man,' etc. Even for Mr. Pickwick in this limited case we can read 'elderly gentleman' and for Charlie and his aunt we can read 'undergraduate and English spinster.'

But this humor keeps merging towards and suggesting the higher humor that turns on character: in which the situation is rendered 'funny' (to use our simplest word) because of the person concerned. Thus in the *Pickwick Papers*, when the soldiers chased Mr. Pickwick it was funny as the vision of an elderly gentleman being chased. Mr. Pickwick, as yet, we hardly know: neither did Dickens, or only by intuition, not yet by acquaintance. "I thought of Mr. Pickwick," he wrote, as the sole explanation of the origin of that illustrious gentleman. Later on in the book if Mr. Pickwick were chased it would be funny because it was Mr. Pickwick. When Tartarin to save his life cuts the Alpine rope that holds Bompard (who is doing the

same thing), the situation is not only funny but doubly funny because it is ‘just like Tartarin.’ Of course the situation must first show the character, but as this develops, the character reacts on it. Such amusing creatures as Mr. Wodehouse’s Jeeves, and Mr. Harry Leon Wilson’s Ruggles, once created, carry an atmosphere of amusement with them: just as Sherlock Holmes sitting with Watson in Baker Street spells mystery before he even speaks. It is the art of genius to ‘create’—or rather, ‘to put over’—a character quickly. Observe how Mr. Harry Leon Wilson writes one opening page, and out steps Ruggles. Take then the humorous character, place the personages in humorous situations, use for its transmission all the art of words and verbal technique, and you have the work of humor in its fully developed form. To produce it is not an easy task. Writing sermons is play beside it.

*Chapter V*  
*THE HUMOR OF CHARACTER*

As the introduction to this chapter I permit myself to narrate a personal experience. Just before I ceased being a professor, one of my colleagues, running his hand through what remained in fluff of what had been his hair, and speaking in the bleating voice acquired by long lecturing said to me, "My! My! there used to be some queer old characters among the professors when we came here thirty-five years ago! There are none now!" And he shuffled off with his head wobbling like a mantelpiece ornament.

This illusion is shared by many people, that there were queer characters when they were young, queer characters in the little village on Cornwall where they spent last summer, terribly queer old characters at Llandydd in Wales or at Saucisson-sur-Marne in France—but none here and now.

The truth is that the queer people are all around you, plenty of them, if you have the eyes to see them. If you are lacking in sense of humor, or in that angle of it, you won't know that they are there. If you have a commonplace mind absorbed in things rather than people, and in money rather than imagination, people will look all pretty much alike. If you have a serious mind, full of some particular content of purpose, you will classify them on different lines. A missionary sees people as Christians, heathens, Presbyterians, etc.; an insurance agent sees them as 'prospects,' and so on. The divisions, which are really infinite, correspond to what you want or need to see. It is a patterned grating that you yourself lay on the surface.

So it is not likely that you will of yourself be fully aware of all the odd differences and incongruities that make up 'character.' But if you have any kind of reasonable and intelligent mind it will happen sometimes that you open the magic pages of an enchanted book by a Charles Dickens. The whole world changes around you and is full of 'characters.' Later when you sink down again with the dead weight of your own individuality, you say to yourself, "Those are not *real* people, they are just caricatures." But you're quite wrong.

By outstanding characters we mean individuals in whom some particular quality or eminence is developed beyond those of his fellow-men. Chang, the Chinese giant, was 8 feet, 2 inches high; Isaac Newton knew Euclid without learning it, and Emerson was so good that he wrote essays about it. But these are not what are meant by 'characters' in the humorous sense, nor is it in connection with them that we speak of the 'humor of character.' By this is meant differences and oddities in character of a nature to involve an incongruity, contradiction or paradox, and thus set

up that 'frustrated expectation' which we have seen to be the basis of all humor. Thus it is contrary to expectation that a huge man should have a tiny voice as huge men sometimes have, or that a meek little rat should have a ferocious moustache. These are appearances only. But it is equally incongruous, let us take simple examples, that a man full of swagger should run away like Mr. Dowler in *Pickwick*; that a college professor should be as simple as a loon; and a peasant (an age-old example) as shrewd as a cardinal. Even oddities of speech or gait or dress make 'character' because they break a rule and so set up an incongruity—or, as it were, start an exultation.

It is a principal theme of this treatise that all humor everywhere can be reduced to the same basic elements, as all physical forces are reduced to the same law of gravitation. So with the humor of character; a man who has the habit of keeping on repeating some phrase or form of words—"Yes, yes, yes," or "Very good, very good," becomes 'funny.' Women's fashions, when they first come out, *ought* to look funny and *do* look funny to children or Negroes. But for the most of us, the sense of oddity has worn thin by the very expectation of it. 'What next?' is all we ask. It takes a terrific effort to make a comic or burlesque costume for a woman. In fact it can only be done by taking one that was all the rage a few years ago and now is not; that opens up a new 'exultation.'

But although custom kills, yet vagaries and oddities of dress, gait, manner and accent can be standardized as 'funny' and thus retain their first shock and contrast on the principles of repetition and conservatism spoken of in the first chapter. Thus a 'rustic in a smock-frock' is a stock character and when he says "I beä" and "I baint," he just hits it right. His transatlantic counterpart is the 'upstate rube' (that means a rustic young man from the upper part of New York state) wearing a gingerbread suit with high-water pants and a bright red tie and saying, "No, siree, you don't fool me!" Hence the thousand and one variants of comic characters of the stage, all running to stock type and yet all true: the round banker with the heavy gold watch, the lean editor with ink all over him, the tatterdemalion tramp, the bar-keeper with the wicker sleeves—their name is legion. The stage doesn't make them, they are there! or were till yesterday. I have seen people in Centralia, Missouri, who looked exactly as if they came from Centralia, Missouri, and old men in a Hampshire village looking as if they came straight out of a Hampshire village.

I say advisedly 'or were till yesterday.' The future is yet to come. The standardizing, levelling tendencies that smooth us out and make us all the same may end in eliminating if not 'character' at least the appearance of it and the dress. Modern life, in raising the level of the mass, lowers individual eminence. Mass

production brings with it mass thinking. Mass economic life compels a new kind of cohesion in which the individual is forced and fitted into a pattern. He can't have any liberty because there is nothing to choose: unless everybody chooses the same, nobody gets anything. The human mind, or rather the human outlook, is already accommodating itself to this idea: people accept social regimentation, expect to be told what to do and what to be and how to be it. The very scope of our mechanical invention makes us all the more sheeplike. In the morning all the sheep listen to a shepherd broadcasting prayers, news and weather; in the afternoon all the sheep look over the fence at a ball game (cricket, base, or foot); in the evening all the sheep listen to a lullaby. To what extent humanity can undergo this superimposed layer of sameness without change, is surely an open question: they may change to something better or worse, but hardly remain the same.

To this extent then it is true that there were more queer characters to be found in the village of our youth, or at Carcassonne-sur-les-Puits than here and now. Our uniform life reduces everyone's routine to that of every other: enables each to look down the little vista of his lot in life as down an alley lined with trees. The very certainty of his lot (barring dismissal or disaster) takes all the adventure out of it: the future looks as close as the present: there is no uncertainty but death: and that is coming. No wonder that in such an environment 'character' cannot live, or not visibly and obviously. The outward signs of it will go: the 'rubes' will disappear and the 'Cornish rustics' will unbutton their smock-frocks at the neck and put on 'step-ins.'

I have often thought that one can realize how great is the suppression of the individual under the urban industrialism of to-day, by turning back the pages of contemporary history. Think how different things were a generation or so ago in America when humanity was on the march and moved into new towns and settlements overnight. I have written elsewhere in describing the Winnipeg that was:

*"I have always felt that there must be something exhilarating, stimulating, superhuman in the rushing, upward life of a boom town—a San Francisco of the '50's, a Carson City of the '60's, a Winnipeg of the '80's. The life of the individual fits into the surroundings as into a glove—the 'world' no longer means something far away, something in the papers—it is right there. In the life of the great cities of to-day the individual is crushed, lost, is nothing. In the boom town his life is life itself. There everybody is somebody. 'Character' springs like a plant and individuality blooms like a rose: and forthwith there are gay people, brave people, and queer people—room for everybody to be something; not the crushed dead-level uniformity of the metropolis. Everybody*

becomes, as in Charles Dickens's America, 'a remarkable man': indeed we all are, in reality, if looked into deeply enough.

*In such a setting politics swell into grandeur: social life becomes a whirl—life itself a day-by-day adventure, and the future an infinite vista. So was it with Winnipeg of the boom, as beside which the New York and London of today are dull and commonplace."*

It might be thought that what has just been said contradicts what was said at the opening of the chapter about queer characters being always there if we could see them. In some measure it does, but not much. It only means that they get harder to see. The uniformity of life interposes a medium of similarity of dress, habits, amusements and reading which tends to obscure 'character.' But at least as yet 'character' is there underneath. What sameness and uniformity and mass ideas and mass audition of mass news and mass amusement, soon to be increased by television where everybody sees everybody, will ultimately do to human kind we don't know. But the process is only beginning. Things will last our time. The distinguished American novelist, Mr. Sinclair Lewis, wrote a monumental novel called *Babbitt* to show that in America everybody is alike. And forthwith Babbitt refused to be alike—stepped out of the book as a character with a lot of attributes, and kindly ones, of his own. He escaped, like Sherlock Holmes and others, from the hands of his creator and became a person on his own, in fact, a 'regular *Babbitt*.'

We ask then, a little more explicitly, What makes humorous character and how is it presented in literature? We turn to the world of books and we find the humorous characters defiling in a merry troop that comes down through the centuries, a very cavalcade. Some of the faces we only half know or can't distinguish, but others seem as real as we do ourselves. Here is Don Quixote with Sancho Panza beside him, and Falstaff, and Monsieur Jourdain, the Bourgeois Gentilhomme of Molière, and here's Sir Roger de Coverley and the Vicar of Wakefield, and Mr. Pickwick in the midst of such a jostle that we can hardly see him for the crowd, and so on right down to the Mr. Jeeveses and the Ruggleses of Red Gap, hurrying to catch up with the rest. And here's a whole boatload, it seems, paddling in from America on Huck Finn's raft. He's got old Rip Van Winkle, and Sam Slick and a lot of miners from Calaveras county, and an odd lot picked up anywhere and everywhere with certificates from O. Henry and Ring W. Lardner. What a company! Don't talk to me of the Royal Society or of the Smithsonian Institution in comparison with such good company as that.

So we ask, What makes the humor of character and how do we analyse it out? This process of analysis is like applying the microscope to the soft beauty of the

flower wet with dew, or to the down on the ripened peach. It seems to threaten to turn it into something else. What we call *ripe* fruit is fruit that is losing its vitality and starting to rot: the still life of the woods teems with a million parasites: autumn is death and snow is burial. No one can make the scientific view of the world *beautiful*, unless it be the vast infinities of the astronomer.

So when literature is ‘cut and dried’ (the very phrase betrays us), it must lose something of its ideal aspects. If ‘characters’ are thought of as made out of this and made out of that, their essential life is gone. We might hesitate to unbutton Mr. Pickwick’s waistcoat for fear that sawdust would fall out. But perhaps our fears are needless. When science analyses the human body till it can find no further element to disintegrate, it still cannot find the main thing it looks for—the principle of life, the soul. This may be so with literature. There is perhaps an elusive essence that escapes us, an inspiration that analysis cannot find. Call this the original ‘humour’ of Hippocrates and we are back in a circle where we started.

Queer characters, humorous characters, when analysed present incongruities that do not clash with reality. The incongruities must be real and possible: if not, what is produced is a comic character. Thus the books of Charles Dickens are filled with humorous characters. The *Bab Ballads* are full of ‘comic characters.’ The comic characters could easily have their real counterparts, easily be ‘reset’ as human characters. Let us take Captain Joyce and Captain Reece. They were both so polite, easy and indulgent with their men that they set up a contrast or incongruity between what a captain is and should be and what they are:

*If ever they were dull or sad,  
The Captain danced to them like mad,  
Or told, to make the time pass by,  
Droll legends of his infancy.*

That was Reece, R.N., of H.M.S. *Mantelpiece*. He didn’t *really* dance at all. Here is Captain Joyce (command unknown) who protested against a love-sick sailor perpetually singing willow-willow to the accompaniment of the banjo:—

*Lay aft, you lubber, do,  
What’s come of that young man, Joe?  
Belay!—’vast heaving! you!  
Do kindly stop that banjo!*

Yet Joyce who ‘loved duty’ could be stern and ended by giving Joe ten thousand lashes. Did he really? No. Did he really call up to the yards ‘Kindly stop that

Banjo'? No. What, then, is the point? That these comic impossibilities are a sort of distorted reflection of naval actualities, the 'stern-duty' idea, and the 'look-after-your-men' notion. But a quite different thing is the Captain Cuttle of *Dombey and Son*, not *comic* in the sense that he is not literally impossible. He could have had a wooden arm and he could have said 'Stand by!'—a phrase obviously an incongruity in civil life, and he could have used metaphors of the sea, and looked as rough as mahogany with a heart as soft as tallow.

These contrasts and oddities of dress and talk, these inconsistencies of rough exterior and smooth insides (pass me the phrase, as the French would say, in favor of its justice), of vociferous words and kindly actions—these make up the characters of humor. They must balance out on the kindly side, they must help to make a good world or reconcile us at least to one that might have been worse. Humor and human kindness are one.

Now if you add to them, connect with them, the humor of situation! Then you've got something. Put one of our 'characters' where we get to know him in one of those odd mixed-up situations discussed above, and the fun is intensified seven times. One recalls the man, temporarily without his trousers, diving into a cupboard to hide and finding himself in a ballroom! Now suppose it were Mr. Pickwick or the man from Blankley's who dined in the wrong house: let it be Mr. Winkle, or Mr. Verdant Green or the little Curate of the *Private Secretary*.

In other words, it is when character and situation combine to produce a truly humorous conception that we feel ourselves rising far above the level of the mere comic, the burlesque, and scarcely needing the artifices of wit and verbal forms to convey the situation. Yet they help too: after all, humor must be expressed in language. It is true that the expression of humor is often damaged by the narrator trying to be too *comical*: but there is a mode and method that suits each narrative, subtle as silk. An incident involving the humor of character and situation may be deliberately narrated in a mock heroic style, or a wilfully serious style, or a comic style, or as it were taken out of the narrator's own hand and related by a character. Space here forbids the detailed discussion of what may be called the rhetoric of humor. For that the student (if he insists on being one) may turn to Mr. A. A. Thomson's excellent text *Written Humour* (1936). This, as a deliberate attempt to teach people how to write humorously, is a good sign of the times. Till now the humorist was told to sing as a bird; the dyspeptic essayist was trained at college.

But for the happiest effects of humorous creation there is needed not only character and situation but that elusive element called atmosphere. The characters of the story must be surrounded by a peculiar medium of make-believe: they must be

seen through an air colored to a slight rosiness as from the setting of the sun or the veil of ashes of a forest fire. It is as if one looked at them through colored glasses without knowing it. How is it done? I think largely from the 'tone' or 'tune' of the writing, and partly by inflection from the other characters. They all help to keep it up. Few would deny that the greatest master of this 'humorous atmosphere' was Charles Dickens. Of the nineteen hundred individuals, more or less, whose names occur in his work, hundreds and hundreds are 'humorous characters,' 'queer' people, or to speak in a circle 'people right out of Dickens.' Some of them are created as it were by sudden magic, a few odd sentences, a paragraph does it. One thinks of Mr. F.'s aunt, the unaccountable and silent lady who broke into conversations with sudden and irrelevant remarks, "When we lived at Henley, Barnes's gander was stolen by tinkers."

Atmosphere, of course, is given to a book when the writer writes in the name of one of his characters, as when Robert Louis Stevenson pretends that he is Jim Hawkins and tells about Treasure Island, or Mark Twain pretends to be, or still to be, Huckleberry Finn. It is much used in historic romances in order to bring in the kind of language that the writer imagines to be historic: as when a French nobleman of the time of Louis Quatorze is made to say "Pish!" to show how aristocratic and impatient he is, although there is no such word in French and never was. Atmosphere is easy enough to give, as thick as soup, but the trouble is to get it right, especially the atmosphere of humor. Narration through a character is marvellous when well done (see again *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*) but if unsuccessful is tiresome beyond words. Dickens, who could break all the rules of art as Napoleon broke all the rules of battle, would narrate through a character and still be talking as Charles Dickens. Esther Summerson (in *Bleak House*) saves her face by now and again using the namby-pamby 'nice' language of Victorian women, but most of the time she is Charles Dickens. At times a writer succeeds in creating a wonderful atmosphere by a manner of relating which is his own voice and at the same time is not: as if he were voicing the voice of the world. This is the method of Captain Harry Graham in that delightful book, *The Private Life of Gregory Gorm*. This is the happy and instinctive method of Mr. P. G. Wodehouse, a master of humorous atmosphere.

But turn again to the waiting characters of our cavalcade. We have not space to talk of more than a few of them. Some of lesser rank like Caleb Balderstone or the Vicar of Wakefield will not take it ill if we leave them out as scarcely known to all the world to-day. Others are so very recent, the Jeeveses and the Ruggleses that though we know them well, many of our neighbors have not met them yet. That part also of

the cavalcade we must perforce leave aside. But eminent among the crowd are characters so great that all the world knows them or argues itself unknown. Shall we call forth Don Quixote, and Falstaff and Monsieur Jourdain, Mr. Pickwick, Tartarin and Huckleberry Finn?

Among the first of the great characters of modern humor is Don Quixote, otherwise Don Quixote de la Mancha. Spaniards and Americans call him, by pronunciation, Don Keehotay, English people usually Don Quicksot. For the French he is Don Quichotte and his name runs through the languages as a common noun and adjective. To live in an imaginary world, seeking to set wrong right, is to be 'quixotic.'

Don Quixote was created from the mind of Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra (1547-1616). Cervantes was a Spanish soldier, playwright and story-writer in the great age of Spanish literature that paralleled Elizabethan England. He saw much of adventure, of war, of poverty, of prison, of everything except wealth and success. For five years he was a prisoner and slave among the Moors of Algiers. Ransomed, he fell into distress at home (at Seville) and into the prison terms (several of them) that in those days accompanied distress. In prison—at home, not at Algiers—he planned his Don Quixote book—"just the kind of thing," he said, "that might come out of a prison." What he meant, we don't know. Out of prison came also Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Raleigh's *History of the World*, and the matchless stories of O. Henry.

Modern critics, who refuse to let a plain thing alone, have now started a theory that Cervantes's work is a vast piece of 'symbolism.' If so, Cervantes didn't know it himself and nobody thought of it for three hundred years. He meant it as a satire upon the silly romances of chivalry. It was Cervantes who, as has been said a thousand times, helped to laugh out of existence what remained of mediæval chivalry.

The humor involved in Don Quixote cannot be understood without the background. The feudal system, when it grew up, was a wonderful thing. It may come back again. It was the only way to gather again into cohesion the wreckage of a people decimated, trampled and dispersed by barbarian invasion and social upheaval. Students should read such a book as Brentano's *Middle Ages* before they take their next laugh at the 'fuddle' system. It was the only way. A strong man built himself in among the rocks in a castle like a boulder damming a torrent, and called other refugees to his side. Later a village nestled below the rock and the vineyards grew again. Gone was the old Roman state with its compacts and plebiscites and the codes of the praetor peregrinus. In its place was personal allegiance, the love of Our Lady, the faith of a gentleman and the greater Glory of God. Spin our world fast

enough, just a little faster than now, and it will break that way again, and we shall need the rock of refuge.

With the feudal system came chivalry, its animating spirit, the code of conduct of war, honor and love. This replaced the cold negations of stoicism, the creed of the Roman gentleman. Chivalry enjoined submission to God and to those above, condescension to those below, pity for a fallen foe and, for love, a devotion that gave all and asked nothing. Of equality it never heard: it spoke not of rights but duties. In its highest ecstasies it went trailing off with fluttering bannerets to the Holy Land to drive the infidel from the Sepulchre of Christ.

All this changed. Feudalism filled its allotted purpose and degenerated. The baron turned from defence to rapacity. Bigger and bigger toads fought for bigger and bigger puddles. Gunpowder knocked down castles and artillery made a nation. Feudalism, as they say in German-American, was 'all.'

With it had degenerated 'chivalry,' gone utterly to seed. Bravery had reduced itself to so many formulas as to who could fight whom, and how, that it was as bad as algebra: degrees of family birth and courage and exaltation were all labelled and indicated with tabards and devices, with gules argent and lions rampant till a group of knights looked like a pack of cards. A dim reflection of the pomp of chivalry and feudalism survives in such present offices as those of Gold Stick, Norrey King of Arms, the Harbinger and the High Almoner. These almost sound as if you could take tricks with them at poker. These people don't exist in Montana. It was Cervantes who kept them out.

Love, also, had gone silly, a stage it easily takes. It had passed into pledges, vows, observances, a code of lover's duty that had to be interpreted by a Court of Love—with penalties for a criminality against Cupid. The vows and pledges of the lovesick lovers were like the bets at any American presidential election when a man bets that if a democrat is elected he won't shave till he's put out. That man, sitting all hairy and defiant, is straight out of the fourteenth-century court of love. Both, really, should be in a police court. The mediæval lover could of course take a 'saunter' to the Holy Land: but see the irony that even language can carry buried in it—a pilgrimage to the Sainte Terre became a 'saunter.' But don't scoff at the Middle Ages till you realize what is happening to our word 'cruise': this was once done by the Columbuses and the Vasco da Gamas, but now by tired business men drinking dry rum cocktails on the palm-deck of a West Indian 'cruiser.'

If then we grasp just what had happened to feudalism and chivalry we can realize what it was that Cervantes did with Don Quixote and appreciate the glorious humor that lies at the base of it. The detail we can hardly follow. The book is too

long-drawn for most of us to-day. But it can make us realize again the great power of humorous writing as a social force. Books of tears move the world as did *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, books of ecstasy enthrall the soul as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* did, but Cervantes's book helped to return to sanity the mind of a continent still a little delirious.

The hero, Don Quixote de la Mancha, has read so deeply on chivalry—of knightly conduct towards damsels in distress, of evil giants to overthrow—that his mind has slipped its gears, that he must needs set off on a pilgrimage to set wrong right. Don Quixote is long and lean and sallow—a queer figure for a knight at arms—his face is at once vacant and illuminated. Add to him his queer jangling accoutrements, his horse Rosinante, a 'nag' in name and in frame; attach to him his comic relief, the rotund and unhappy Sancho Panza, turned from man of all work to a squire at arms by what financiers call a forced conversion. Take all this, add the vows sworn to the Lady Dulcinea of Tobosa (she kept an inn) and start him on the path of adventure still quoted by all the world. Here are the windmills turned to giants, the captives turned to pigs—the contrast between the everlasting absurdities of mediæval superstition and the hard facts of life. And yet somehow Don Quixote wins out by the very exaltation of his idiocy.

Mark Twain traversed the same ground three hundred years later with his *Connecticut Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*. It was a priceless book (1889) but was somewhat spoiled for the English public because Mark Twain lumped in Queen Victoria and her England as part of the Middle Ages, to say nothing of putting in Cervantes's Spain. To Mark Twain there were just two great periods of history, the wicked one, held over in Europe under kings and popes, and the good one, conducted in America from Hartford, Connecticut. But for students it is interesting to compare Mark Twain's nineteenth-century indictment, done in the roaring merriment of broad burlesque, interspersed with intense realities, and the classic pages of Cervantes.

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Falstaff in appearance is the very opposite of Don Quixote. For lean read fat, up to the very point of unwieldiness. He starts out with the initial advantage, for humor, of being fat. In vain Mr. E. V. Knox and Shakespeare himself elsewhere have tried to justify, or even to exalt, the fat man. He won't do, except for fun. Fat lovers are out of it: fat kings like the monstrous Louis XVIII, a wobbling jelly rolling in a brougham to fill Napoleon's place—fat kings are comic. But Falstaff, just right! The very antithesis of a martial appearance: a living incongruity: knightly dignity of name and a rolling body and a loose tongue. But not without brains: Falstaff is no fool and

differs utterly from Don Quixote, who lived on illusions, by having no illusions. In Shakespeare's day the gloom of dying feudalism, killed on Bosworth field and calling still for a horse, had given way to the new sunrise of national monarchy; to the new panoply of national armies, the Field of the Cloth of Gold and to the exaltation and adventure of opening the New World: to all this idealism Falstaff stands in happy contrast, swilling sack. Not for him the valor of service, or the raising of the Cross in the Wilderness. Time enough for that later, as was told Falstaff himself when he lay a-dying and 'babbled of green fields.' The humor of Falstaff is based on the chasm of contrast between his ungainly, inglorious person and the new glory of Elizabethan England.

It probably made no difference to Shakespeare that Falstaff, living under Henry IV, two centuries before, was more Elizabethan than mediæval. To Shakespeare—let it be said in one burst of heresy, followed by silence—history made little difference, nor geography. To him Morocco and Bohemia and Denmark were all the same place. Moors and Niggers and Jews all talked alike. He would have laid a play in North America among the Seneca Indians with a Prince of Tonawanda talking just like Portia. But wherever Shakespeare got him, and wherever he properly belongs in history, Falstaff is one of the great humorous characters of world literature. Take the scene where Falstaff (*Henry IV*, Part I), talking with Prince Hal, assumes the rôle of the prince's father and describes himself.

And yet Falstaff runs true to the line in which humor lies in that we don't dislike him; on the contrary, we feel we could enjoy his society. Most of us would rather take Falstaff out fishing or put him up at our golf club than we would Antonio or the Doge of Venice or King Lear. He'd make a bigger hit.

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Next in line to the creation of Don Quixote and Falstaff, not quite contemporary, appears that of Monsieur Jourdain, the Bourgeois Gentilhomme, at the hands of the unsurpassed genius of comedy, Molière. The scene has shifted from the open country of Andalusia and the dangersome midnight on Gad's Hill, to the Paris of the Sun King, Louis XIV, the centre of a new and unrivalled effulgence, beside which chivalry was dim and knighthood drab. The nobles are now cast for the part of butterflies. Fashion rages. Mimic combats of the wits of the *salon* replace the rude field of arms. Learning has become fashionable. Even war is made luxurious with a huge attendant staff of the royal cuisine and a battery of amusements. A polite world replaces a world of chivalry and a new scepticism begins to undermine the older scholasticism. Underneath it, commences already to stir and move the new giant of commerce and industry presently to upset it all.

No wonder that the new people—the *nouveaux riches*, of commerce, begin to aim at a place among the great: desire to acquire, and are willing to pay for acquiring, the polish of the world of the court. “Polish me!” says Monsieur Jourdain, newly enriched, and forthwith masters of philosophy and *maîtres d’armes* begin to try to teach Mr. Jourdain the unteachable and to make out of a bourgeois a gentleman. If Molière’s theme had been simply that, namely that you can’t make a gentleman out of a tradesman, it would be mere snobbism. Indeed, that very theme has been reflected in a hundred English books and plays and lies close to the English heart. Thus in *Sandford and Merton*, quoted above, the whole point is that little Harry isn’t a gentleman and can’t ever be one, yet it does little Tommy who *is* a gentleman a lot of good to see how moral and decent can be a little boy who isn’t a gentleman. That sounds like Anita Loos, in whose language a version of Molière done in the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* strain would probably miss the point.

Molière’s humor turns partly on the simplicity and *naïveté* of Monsieur Jourdain—his joy in his new coat, his amazement that he has talked prose all his life, etc. etc., but also on the silliness and futility of the things they teach him. Monsieur Jourdain, eager to learn rhetoric, desires to send a letter to a *marquise* to convey the sentiment: “Belle marquise, vos yeux me font mourir d’amour.” Nothing is more delightful than the way the sentence is twisted back and forward, to Monsieur Jourdain’s further amazement, in variants such as:—“Belle marquise, d’amour mourir me font vos yeux” and “Mourir d’amour me font, belle marquise, vos yeux,” etc.

The crowning humor of the setting is found in the line, quoted and quoted for ever: “Les gens de qualité savent tout sans avoir rien appris.” And yet with it all we like Monsieur Jourdain. He is what the French call *bon*, which means good with a touch of ‘silly.’ I’m not sure that I’d like to be it. Monsieur Jourdain’s faith in those about him is touching, his belief in learning is appealing and his reverence for the mighty is not snobbishness but just humility of mind.

Molière’s comic genius, or rather his genius for comedy, has never been surpassed. His light has never burnt dim. Shakespeare, no one doubts, was a great dramatist. His comedies are filled with interest: but will any candid mind find in their lines the laughter that breaks from the open page of Molière, and interpreted by French genius on the stage convulses still alike either court or crowd? Comparisons and estimates of Molière are rendered all the more difficult for us from the fact that translation, in the full literary sense, is almost impossible, and especially so in the field of humor. Translation can tell us, in a sense, what a person said but not how he said it. It is all right when used for a railway time-table, all wrong when used for a sonnet. What for example is the French for ‘How d’you do?’ There isn’t any. ‘How d’you

do' is a peculiar English idiom which long since lost all connection with its original enquiry and has been deteriorated into a gurgle of salutation. The French 'Comment vous portez-vous?' is quite different. So is 'Comment allez-vous?' and 'Comment ça va?' and the muttered word 'Monsieur!' accompanied by half a bow. What is the French for "A primrose by the river's brim, a yellow primrose was to him and it was nothing more"? There isn't any. What is the English for "Et rose, elle a vécu ce que vit la rose"? There is none.

Now, imaginative literature is suffused with uses of language involving such delicate shades of meaning that they refuse to recombine in other tongues. One may take something and under the name of 'translating' it, may write something far better. Fitz Gerald wrote the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám* and pretended that it was Persian. King James's translators took Hebrew and Attic Greek and turned them with unsurpassed art into an English already slightly archaic, with a result that we have a so-called 'translation' better than the translated idioms and superior to the language into which it was translated. These are questions of a different order. But of translating humor itself one despairs.

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In one long stride we pass down two centuries and a half from the Bourgeois Gentilhomme to Mr. Pickwick. Many of us would agree that here is the greatest humorous character ever known. From no other pages in the world's books, as compared with the *Pickwick Papers*, has ever so much laughter come, the unsullied laughter of self-forgetfulness, that can brighten our hours of leisure, alleviate the hours of sorrow, expel, if but for a moment, the dark shadow of domestic care and recall to those in exile the sights and sounds of home.

It seems a thousand pities that the academic world of the colleges maintains and always has maintained a sort of conspiracy of pedantry that refuses to exalt Dickens into his proper place: that treats his works as a sort of tap-room idleness; that studies and analyses and even tries to laugh at Aristophanes of two thousand years ago, not realizing the genius beside its elbow. Scholars would deny the superiority of Dickens over Aristophanes, and what can we do about it? Entrenched behind a *chevaux de frise* of Greek verbs and a smokescreen of footnotes there is no way to chase them out.

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Mr. Pickwick was born in 1836, but of his literary origin we know nothing. Dickens, as said above, took over a contract to write a set of papers about Cockney sportsmen. His suggestion that he should change the Cockney sportsmen into a club was accepted. "And then," writes Dickens, "I thought of Mr. Pickwick!"

Just that: with no elaboration: whether Mr. Pickwick broke upon him, full, sudden and glorious, as the Pacific Ocean to the eyes of Nuñez Balboa, as the law of gravitation to Isaac Newton or whether Mr. Pickwick dawned gradually and softly as the summer daylight that is to turn to noon-day effulgence, we cannot say. Mr. Pickwick, be it observed, is peculiar among the great characters in not being a necessary emergence from a given background. Molière must have talked with a hundred Jourdain before he rolled them into one: Monsieur Jourdain is a consequence of the court of Louis XIV as inevitable as a syllogism. Don Quixote was there already: he's just a knight in capital letters and upside down. So, in a way, is Falstaff. And Tartarin of Tarascon was, and is, an effect of the south of France and the Mediterranean sun: it was no question how and where to get him; you couldn't get away from him. But Mr. Pickwick, what is he? An English gentleman? No, except for Miss Anita Loos to whom all men are gentlemen. Pickwick is a gentleman, of course, but that's not the point. Is he the picture of a tradesman? No. A typical Englishman? No, a typical nothing; he's just Mr. Pickwick. By consummate art, or happy accident, Mr. Pickwick's age is left in the twilight. Dickens when he created him was himself twenty-four, an age at which a man of forty-five seems old and a man of sixty-five a Methuselah; and he wrote at a period when people died so early that while alive they had to keep moving—marry at eighteen in a runaway chaise with an angry old father of forty in pursuit, and so on.

The result is that every reader sees his own Pickwick. To a boy in his teens Mr. Pickwick is about forty-five, for a man in his thirties Mr. Pickwick is, say, fifty, and for a man of forty-five Mr. Pickwick is probably about sixty-five. I imagine that for an old man of eighty Pickwick would be about a hundred and ten.

In point of fact it may be doubted whether Dickens himself knew Mr. Pickwick's age. We have it on good authority that Dickens, when asked which leg Silas Wegg had lost (see *Our Mutual Friend*), answered that he didn't know and hadn't thought about it. So with Pickwick's age. All students of Dickens's works will at once point to the only passage that seems to give evidence. Mr. Pickwick, invited to slide on the pond, the fatal pond, at Dingley Dell, protested at first that he "hadn't done such a thing these thirty years." But I don't think that means much: Dickens probably hardly noticed the phrase as it ran down his pen. He was not writing a history. He just meant that Mr. Pickwick hadn't gone sliding for ever so long. Yet one admits on the face of it that it might point to an age of forty-five years, fifteen spent in sliding and thirty spent in not sliding.

In the matter of the indefiniteness of Pickwick's age, Dickens's instinct was right. Mr. Pickwick had to be just passing from middle age to old age, certainly not old

and certainly not young. There lies the breeding ground, or shall we say the feeding ground, of the true hero of humorous fiction; a man elderly but not old: rotund but not fat: heavy but not infirm. As they grow in years men turn mellow, women (or say some of them) turn yellow: men get broad, women fat. It gets hard to use them in fiction. As heroines or angels women have their place, the front place, in fiction. But later in life there is little place for them except as comics (Mrs. Gamp) or masculinities (Betsy Trotwood). And for humor, they just don't fit: women are not humorous except by exception. There is no such person as Mrs. Pickwick.

Let it be admitted that this above opinion is purely controversial and unprovable: it is only a statement of personal impression with no further value and no further offence.

If one can dare apply the scalpel of the anatomist to the person of Mr. Pickwick—and in a book for students like the present, it must be done—we shall find that the humor of him can be traced to the same structure and same vital tissues as all other humor. The incongruities, the 'frustrated expectations,' the sudden juxtapositions of impossibilities all come together with a pop in Mr. Pickwick. Here at the opening is the Pickwick Club, its deliberations the counterpart of the House of Commons except perhaps as to national authority. The exception is like that of Mark Twain's temperate old man who had "never tasted liquor unless you count whisky." The juxtaposition makes the House of Commons and the Club both funny, one too big, and the other too small. Then Mr. Pickwick—his authorship of "Observations on the Theory of Tittlebats," his scientific discoveries—all carrying the pomp of scholarship and the fact of emptiness. The beginning runs close to burlesque, but Mr. Pickwick shook it off himself at a jog-trot when he got started. Presently we see him better: the contrast of his physique, immobilized by middle age (whatever that may be), and his brisk inquiring mind, his easy amiability leading to misadventure: later a stubborn bedrock of character that sends him to jail rather than marry Mrs. Bardell. Pickwick rises here close to heroism; there are no tittlebats on him. But the greatest thing about the *Pickwick Papers*, of which Mr. Pickwick is at once the cause and effect, is the warm glow of humanity—human kindness that suffuses every page. I defy anybody to produce a summer atmosphere brighter and more attractive than that of the All Muggleton cricket match.

It is an odd vagary of humorous genius that at times it recoils on the writer. Dickens, who had no use for games, is here poking fun at cricket. Yet the more we love cricket the more entranced we sit to watch the bowling of a Luffey and the batting of a Podder. The description of the two cricketers one of whom looked like half a roll of flannel and the other one like the other half, is unsurpassed in the

technique of humorous writing. Yet because the picture is true it pleases cricketers: Dickens was trying to catch the atmosphere of cricket and the atmosphere caught him.

Set alongside of such a scene its winter counterpart, round the great fires of Dingley Dell at Christmas! No one ever did this like Dickens. Shakespeare might talk of "this royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle . . . this England." Dickens just lighted up the fires of Dingley Dell, got Sam Weller drinking ale and old Wardle pulling corks, and there was England itself!

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In *Tartarin of Tarascon*, who first appeared before the world in 1872, Alphonse Daudet created a character of first rank in the world's humor. The translation of humor, as has been said, is an almost impossible feat and so Tartarin can hardly be appreciated at his full value by English-speaking people.

Nor has the recent presentation of Tartarin in the films much improved the case. Motion pictures applied to the world's masterpieces produce not the thing they start from but something else. It may be something worse, or something better. But it is always something different. The inner light of our mind, illumined from the printed page, reaches where the shadow picture of the screen cannot fall. "A very pretty poem, Mr. Pope," said Bentley the classical scholar, "but not Homer." Many have had the same feeling in looking at the Tartarins and the Micawbers of the cinematograph.

The Moving Picture, be it said by way of digression, is instantaneous and it suffers from its very 'instantaneousness.' It cannot *dwell* on anything: or only in the artificial and purely conventional way of pausing in the narrative to present a 'cut-in' of a huge face (four feet long, though the audience doesn't realize it) with a wet tear, five inches, about to fall. Hence for the purpose of humor of character it is dependent on jumps, jerks and spasms of action to replace pauses of reflection. As has been the practice in this book, let us proceed by an illustration. We are desirous of presenting, let us say, a film of *Barnaby Rudge*, and we have in it the beautiful character study, humorous in the highest sense, of Gabriel Varden the Locksmith. Here is how Charles Dickens introduces him as we first see him, on a wild March evening of rain and wind, *anno domini* 1775, in his gig on the highway, some twelve miles out of London. Gabriel Varden appears as "*a round, red-faced, sturdy yeoman with a double chin, and a voice husky with good living, good sleeping, good humour, and good health. He was past the prime of life, but Father Time is not always a hard parent, and, though he tarries for none of his children, often lays his hand lightly upon those who have used him well; making them*

*old men and women inexorably enough, but leaving their hearts and spirits young and in full vigour. With such people the grey head is but the impression of the old fellow's hand in giving them his blessing, and every wrinkle but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well-spent life."*

Anybody with an instinctive feeling for literature should read that passage with a sort of rapture. Anybody with a feeling for humor can feel, as it were, the atmosphere of it. But can the moving picture reproduce it? Not within a mile. They can get Gabriel Varden's clothes correct to 1775 without a button wrong or a frog missing. They can reproduce his gig so that he himself wouldn't know the difference. What next? He will be seen for perhaps one quarter of a second and then a voice will shout "Yoho! Who goes there?" and the action of the piece goes on. Varden is just a couple of clicks. The thing that breathed life into him, the beautiful paragraph above, is gone, was never there. The 'reflection' is missing. The onlooker is supposed to bring his own reflections, as he might buy his own sandwiches.

Let it be repeated, the point involved is not to decry moving pictures but to say that what they do is not what the written word does, and that when it comes to humor they are from nature compelled to overstress action, to run to pantomime rather than reflection. The results in some cases are marvellous: the 'pictures' can show the wild tumult of a battle where no one had time for reflection anyway. They can't show the humor of a Locksmith sitting in a gig.

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But we were speaking of Daudet's *Tartarin* and of the unsatisfactory medium of translation when applied to humor. Yet in spite of the difficulty of a medium the extraordinary resemblance of the mould and manner of Daudet's writing to that of Charles Dickens creates a basis of sympathetic understanding which goes a long way. This is not to say that Daudet imitated Dickens. He was already writing like Dickens before he ever heard of him; and Dickens wrote just like Daudet before Daudet was born. As a consequence *Tartarin*, like a lot of other people in Daudet's books, is a regular Dickens character; though he differs from every one of them. *Tartarin* is not *Pickwick*: there is no 'elderly man' stuff about him. He could have thrown all four *Pickwickians* out of the window. In fact, *Tartarin* stands among others things for the glory and exuberance of health and strength; so glorious that it 'goes to his head'; *Tartarin*, so to speak, is drunk all the time. His is the over-exuberant life of Southern France, all grapes and sunshine, where the mind gets too overheated for truth and lives in a warm mist of unreality and exaggerations. Hence the expansion, the hugeness of *Tartarin*: he stands in appropriate *costume de chasse*, dreaming of Numidian lions, conscious of his great purpose—and in reality

he'd be afraid of a goat. Or he stands as a mountain climber posed like a statue with folded arms looking at the Alps, as if challenging them to a struggle to the death.

Reduced to a simple formula, as it often is, Daudet's picture of the 'midi' is made to read that in Southern France all the people lie and exaggerate and bluff. That isn't it at all. Like all formulas it perverts truth by condensation. What Daudet meant was that in the South they live in a super-world, like children playing games: a world where they can believe anything they want to believe, and where emphasis lies not on actuality but on appearance: not on whether a thing is or is not so (a matter of no consequence), but on how it sounds. Take as an example the famous scene of Tartarin giving evidence in a court as to the authenticity of a letter, said to have been written by him—

*“Did you write this letter?” asks the judge. Tartarin, with an uplifted hand and the firmness of a Marcus Brutus, says: “Before God and before men I did not write that letter!”*

His lawyer nudges his elbow and whispers. Tartarin realizes that he's got it wrong; that's not the answer he was to give. He strikes another pose, equally noble—the pose registering the contribution of a noble mind.

*“Pardon,” he says, “I did write it.”*

We can imagine the applause of the courtroom in instant response to such nobility of manner: the fact that his oath before “God and men” was all off didn't make any difference.

The humor of the Tartarin books and the Tartarin environment is indeed superb. It combines many elements. It has in it the primitive delight of exaggeration. It has a large element of the attractiveness of humbug, of the clever crook, as discussed in an earlier chapter. But the best of it is the broad way in which whole villages of people are satirized all at once. The Tartarin people live on delusions of greatness: on the least pretext they send delegations of congratulations, read addresses to one another, hold celebrations, fire off guns, and set up floral arches of welcome. They live among the grapes and flowers in a sort of permanent armistice night. There is a contrast between the luxuriant beauty of their home and the fact that they refuse to keep still in it. This riot of the mind, this exuberant fancy, this victory over truth finds its summation in Tartarin.

One figure yet remains of those selected as the world's known and accepted characters of humor—the smallest, the humblest and yet the greatest—the figure of little Huckleberry Finn floating down the Mississippi on his raft. But there the pathos enters in to create the highest humor, the humor of sublimity which I reserve for the concluding chapter. Let Huck sleep a little longer under his ragged coverlet on the

raft: it is not yet sun-up on the Illinois side.

*Chapter VI*  
*COMIC VERSE: THE LIGHTER NOTES*

There is a wide domain where humor is expressed in forms that belong to poetry and verse. Here, as usual, the field is so rich and so little worked as yet that the various blossoms in it toss and mingle in confusion, unnamed or called at random. These are not flowers that blush unseen, but seen so often as to be lost from view. What horticultural show, excited over Brazilian orchids, ever finds a place for a Ragged Robin, or a Wild Cucumber? What literary critic, analysing the genius of Shakespeare, ever pauses to work out the fine distinction between super-comic verse written by a village idiot who might have been a poet laureate, and super-serious verse written to order by a poet laureate himself? Yet there is to the trained eye and ear an evident and interesting difference. How many people can distinguish between poetry that is Execrable, as much in Wordsworth (see *The Stuffed Owl*) and poetry that is merely Deplorable (see the 'free copy' printed in the poetry column of any respectable newspaper)? Or take again the interesting distinction, as made by a trained intelligence, between a comic poem by Thomas Hood trying to be comic, and an epitaph by a mute inglorious Milton, trying not to be.

Yet all of these efforts or achievements in a way are connected with laughter. Like all that goes under humor, they rise to superior forms where mere merriment is lifted into reflection, sharpened into satire or saddened into pathos. I have elsewhere, in a larger work on the *Theory of Humour*, endeavored to grasp all the forms indicated under a chapter heading of *Comic and Super-comic Verse*. But the title is not very satisfactory as the word 'comic' falls short in its reach and misleads in its direction.

One can realize the width and variety of the field by consulting such an anthology as the admirable compendium made by Carolyn Wells (1920 and 1936) as *The Book of Humorous Verse*. For complete extracts and a complete survey of authors and works, it is to such a compendium that I must refer the reader: or rather let me call him the 'student' since he is supposed to be studying this book and not reading it to enjoy it. In any case the limitation of space entirely forbids the mention of names and the citation of extracts except as illustrations of theory. Authors are quoted just as the Latin grammar quotes Cicero, but are not enumerated. There is an admirable French quotation *J'en passe et des meilleurs*, conveying as it were a wistful regret which exactly suits the situation. It is the difficulty of anyone composing such a book as the present volume that the absence of reference to a particular name or a particular book may seem a careless oversight, an evidence of ignorance or a

malicious omission. The French covers it all.

Poetry in the full and proper sense means the creation of things by the human imagination, making something out of nothing, or as children say, out of one's own head. We have come to restrict it to written literature, and to that part of it only where something in the form of expression separates it from common speech. There is no doubt of the superiority of its reach. Poetry can say in a word what prose must say in a page: poetry can convey in a flash what prose loses in a fog. Poetry can breathe life and color and pathos into the texture of words, where prose fails to animate. Words alone will not convey thought. You can say in prose "Macbeth was weary of existence," and nothing much 'gets over.' You can say in slang "McBeth was pretty well fed up," and a certain impression is created. But when you say "Out, out, brief candle," the veil between your mind and that of Macbeth has fallen.

But there is a converse of this. Poetry, let us put it very clearly, in order to be poetry must be really poetry. Now most of it isn't. Prose has to say something or say nothing. Prose wears a plain suit of language—of subjects, adjectives and predicates. But poetry goes in a fine fashion of adornment with rhymes and tropes and metres all a-jingle. So these fine feathers may be used to make a fine bird, when there is nothing really underneath but a frame of sticks. Thus people can write what they think to be poetry and there is nothing in it but rhymed words and matched metres: it conveys no thought of consequence or beauty but only covers up the absence of it.

Hence the poetic form lends itself easily to the fun of the humorist. Much of our poetry is 'so darned silly' that by making it a little sillier still we reveal its silliness. This is, in its proper sense, PARODY. Much of it that is meant to be majestic or heroic misses its mark so completely in trying to present a mighty theme of tragedy or magnificence, that we can get a glorious effect by applying the same heroic measures to a mimic theme of not great consequence. This is MOCK-HEROIC POETRY. Close beside it is the merry re-editing as fun of a theme already written seriously. This is BURLESQUE.

Again, as there is a certain ripple and merriment in the music of good verse, we can turn it to narrative and tell with it a whole merry story of a John Gilpin or a Tam O'Shanter. Such is NARRATIVE LIGHT VERSE. Or again, since poetic forms can say much in little, we turn it into the short explosions of EPIGRAMMATIC VERSE. Or again, if we are born with more poetic feeling than our limited education can properly express, we write the poetry of good intentions that is meant to be exalted and becomes SUPER-COMIC. Something of the same mingled pity and reverence is extended towards this as surrounds, in the camps of savages, the exalted features of the idiot.

But quite apart from inspired idiocy, there are various other forms of SUPER-COMIC

to be carefully distinguished and classified as DEPLORABLE, EXECRABLE and UNPARDONABLE. Reference has already been made to the Deplorable Poetry of the poetry column of the Sunday newspaper. This, like the sermon of the Arkansas farmer in Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, is given for nothing and is well worth it. Such are the poems on spring, and early daffodils. Execrable Poetry differs from Deplorable in that it is written by persons who ought to know better, by real poets over-encouraged and gone silly. Here pity is swallowed up by indignation. Unpardonable Poetry is written by Laureates and academicians under a forced draft.

The humor of the above forms is unintentional. When we find verse written intentionally, and successfully, to create laughter, then we have PURE COMIC VERSE. Here belong many real treasures. When verse is not only amusing but takes on the added intention of exposing faults, not of other people's verse, but of society at large, that is SATIRICAL LIGHT VERSE. When, still in a light form, verse forces laughter even in tragedy and horror, that is TRAGIC LIGHT VERSE; and when we reach the highest form in which, as ever, laughter and tears join in contemplating the incongruities of life itself, that is POETIC HUMOR.

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Of the varied forms that make up the broad field of humor in verse, parody and burlesque have been already treated in connection with the incongruous juxtaposition of ideas. The type of Narrative Light Verse can be illustrated by reference to such well-known poems as *John Gilpin*, written by William Cowper in 1785 and still going strong. The humor of the narrative is the humor of discomfiture—Gilpin sets out to ride to Edmonton for a family celebration, his horse runs away, his wig blows off, the people shout, and so on. Nothing much in it except the way it is told; the pleasant ripple of the rhyme; Gilpin's mock-heroic figure—"a train-band, captain eke was he, of famous London town," . . . "then over all that he might be equipped from top to toe, his long red cloak well brushed and neat he manfully did throw," etc. There is the terrific roadside excitement—"he carries weight, he rides a race, 'tis for a thousand pounds"; and withal such mimic adventure, such a splash for nothing! Since John Gilpin first rode, the lapse of a century and a half has thrown his adventure into what is now an old-world setting of gabled inns, of cobbled streets, and the varied hues of bygone dress—all preserved for us in the art of a Caldecott. Thus as ivy gives new beauty to the walls it covers, the poem has acquired that peculiar charm of half-saddened retrospect on life that is one of the highest elements of humor.

Among the other familiar examples of Narrative Light Verse one thinks of *Tam O'Shanter*, of *The Laird o' Cockpen* by Lady Nairne and of Oliver Wendell

Holmes's *Deacon's Masterpiece (The One Horse Shay)*. It is difficult to say where Narrative Light Verse ends and Mock-Heroic and Comic Poetry begin. But if one can make a distinction it would be that in Narrative Light Verse there is a more or less real and possible story and in the other forms there isn't. Gilpin *did* ride, the Laird o' Cockpen *did* marry, and the Deacon *did* have a shay that collapsed in a heap. But when it comes to *The Yarn of the 'Nancy Bell'* (W. S. Gilbert), in which the narrator has eaten all his shipmates—quite frankly he didn't. The *Jackdaw of Rheims* didn't really fade under a curse and Mr. Hilaire Belloc's *Modern Traveller* didn't really undergo his terrific adventures. But the line is hard to draw.

Narrative Light Verse naturally connects with Mock-Heroic Verse inasmuch as it constantly makes use of mock-heroic language, and mock-heroic attitude. This—the mock-heroic method in prose and verse—rests for its humor on the pretence of terrific importance of things that don't really matter, terrific dangers that are ludicrously small, and tremendous exploits that really amount to nothing. Charles Dickens's earlier and more exuberant work runs to mock-heroic titles and mock-heroic exploits. Compare the original title, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit, his relatives, friends and enemies, comprising all his wills and his ways with a historical record of what he did and what he didn't, showing, moreover, who inherited the family plate, who came in for the silver spoons and who for the wooden ladles*. This mock-heroic extension was dropped later on. Compare the ominous and sombre title of Dickens's last book *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

The mock-heroic idea naturally tends to verse since the very form of word and phrase can heighten the effect, as true poetry reaches beyond prose. Mock-heroic poetry is as old as Homer's *Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, and is never lost from sight. But in the modern world of the last two centuries it perhaps flourished more when classical education filled a larger place than now. People trained to make bad Latin verses could at least make good English ones. The pedantry of heavy scholarship was relieved by the make-believe of light. Very typical examples of mock-heroic verse are found in the *Bon Gaultier Ballads* so popular in Victorian days: for example, the account of Philip Slingsby and the Snapping Turtle:

*Have you heard of Philip Slingsby,  
Slingsby of the manly chest;  
How he slew the Snapping Turtle  
In the regions of the West?*

W. S. Gilbert of the generation that followed had an extraordinary gift of mock-

heroic expression. One thinks of:

*Strike the concertina's melancholy string!  
Blow the spirit-stirring harp like anything!  
Let the piano's martial blast  
Rouse the echoes of the past;  
Of Aghib Prince of Tartary I sing!*

Gilbert combined and heightened this gift with a wonderful trickery of words, as already analysed in the opening chapter of this book. We may refer to the lines in the same poem:

*They played him a sonata—let me see—  
“Medulla oblongata,” key of G—  
etc.*

Compare also the mock-heroic poem of Gilbert which tells that—

*Oh, big was the bosom of brave Alum Bey,  
And also the region that under it lay.*

The charm and fun of the Savoy Operas draw constantly on the mock-heroic, if indeed one may not go further and say that the operas (as ideas, not music) are based on it. Let us recall the military exploits of the Duke of Plaza-Toro, a gem of verse, irrespective of setting or music:

*In enterprise of martial kind,  
When there was any fighting,  
He led his regiment from behind—  
He found it less exciting.  
But when away his regiment ran,  
His place was at the fore, O—  
That celebrated,  
Cultivated,  
Underrated  
Nobleman  
The Duke of Plaza-Toro!*

But lest one should think that the art of mock-heroic verse has died out in our post-war days, we have only to turn to Hilaire Belloc's *Modern Traveller*. Versification was never more ingenious nor heroism ever mocked. The adventures

recorded are those of William Blood:

*I never shall forget the way  
That Blood upon this awful day  
Preserved us all from death.  
He stood upon a little mound,  
Cast his lethargic eyes around,  
And said beneath his breath:  
“Whatever happens we have got  
The Maxim Gun, and they have not.”*

*He marked them in their rude advance,  
He hushed their rebel cheers,  
With one extremely vulgar glance  
He broke the mutineers.  
(I have a picture in my book  
Of how he quelled them with a look.)  
We shot and hanged a few, and then  
The rest became devoted men.*

Students who really want to learn to write verse that appeals by the very ingenuity of its rhymes, should read and reread this admirable model.

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Following on the Mock-Heroic forms of Comic Verse, may be listed all the examples of comic and humorous verse that have the peculiar virtue of conscious, intentional brevity as their common factor. These one names Epigrammatic Verse. Such forms, of course, carry far back in the history of literature. We people of today are not the only ones who liked to hear a good thing said ‘snappily’; but we like it from being chronically in a hurry: the old writers from a sense of art. Leaving out the Greek witticisms, for translation is impossible, one may cite such well-known couplets and rhymes as Coleridge’s:—

*Swans sing before they die—’twere no bad thing  
Should certain persons die before they sing.*

One may quote also the charming and ingenious stanza of the days when there was a ‘king over the water’:

*God bless the King! I mean the faith's Defender.  
God bless—no harm in blessing—the Pretender!  
But who Pretender is, or who is King—  
God bless us all!—that's quite another thing!*

For obvious reasons Epigrammatic Verse has found its most distinctive historic use in epitaphs. Last words have got to be short, or at any rate there's a limit to them. One recalls the delightful French cartoon by M. Abel Faivre in *Le Rire*, depicting a French Député (they certainly do talk a lot) sitting up in his coffin and making a speech. Beside him is an undertaker with the coffin-lid in his hands (a queer effect of drawing), evidently getting restless and saying, "Pardon me, Monsieur le Député, time is up."

Since there is an end even in such a case, brevity becomes the chief virtue in last words and epitaphs. Most characteristically they seek much meaning and deep meaning in few words "*si monumentum requiris circumspice*"; "*Hodie mihi cras tibi*"—and such. The Latin language lends itself better to this than modern languages. The process of breaking speech up into analytical words instead of synthetical inflections gives modern languages their great superiority for general power of expression and shade of meaning—I say it openly and boldly—over Latin and Greek. But since not all excellencies can be enjoyed at once, Latin and Greek still keep the peculiar epigrammatic advantage of saying much in little. "*Capax imperii nisi imperasset*," wrote Tacitus of a Roman Emperor who didn't 'come off.' You can say it better in English with words enough, but you can't pack it up so short.

But when it comes to turning epitaphs from solemnity to humor, then our flexible English comes into its own. Read in Westminster Abbey the epitaph of the poet Gay:

*Life is a jest; and all things show it,  
I thought so once; but now I know it.*

Or let us recall from Dryden:

*Here lies my wife: here let her lie!  
Now she's at rest and so am I.*

Used in a general way and as apart from epitaphs, epigrammatic comic poetry at times pleases by its sheer lack of meaning, the delight being in the thought that words can be so utterly without meaning. The most widely known example of this is Mr. Gelett Burgess's stanza—

*I never knew a Purple Cow,  
I never hope to see one.  
But I can tell you anyhow  
I'd rather see than be one.*

Here is an epigrammatic effect of Artemus Ward. It is intended to convey by words alone the affectation of utter and hopeless simplicity with which he threw his cultivated audiences of London into convulsions of laughter (1865).

*Uncle Simon he  
Clumb up a tree  
To see  
What he could see,  
When presentlee  
Uncle Jim  
Clumb up beside of him  
And squatted down by he.*

Or exactly the contrary effect by showing how very much, even of tragedy, can be packed into a few words:

*Small Boy,  
Pair of skates,  
Hole in ice,  
Heavenly Gates.*

The familiar 'Limerick' is a form of epigrammatic poem belonging in this subclass of Epigrammatic Nonsense. Everybody knows how a limerick runs:

*There was an old man of Apulia,  
Whose conduct was very peculiar;  
He fed twenty-one sons  
Upon nothing but buns,  
That whimsical man of Apulia.*

The above is a sample of the 'pure' and original limerick in which the last line repeats the first, with the addition of an adjective reflecting the point of view arising from the information supplied by the limerick. Take another example and you'll get it again:

*There was an old man of Aosta,  
Who possessed a large cow, but he lost her:  
But they said, "Don't you see  
She has run up a tree,  
You invidious old man of Aosta."*

A point of excellence of the pure limerick was to find rhymes for impossible places such as Aosta and Apulia. I have often wished that someone would write one on Bury St. Edmunds.

The purists, therefore, object to the departure made in the more up-to-date limerick in which the last line is used to cap the climax: indeed, the last line is everything, like the 'conclusion' of a syllogism.

*There was a young man of Quebec  
Who was frozen in snow to his neck,  
When asked "Are you Friz?"  
He replied, "Yes, I is,  
But we don't call this cold in Quebec."*

This limerick is historic as Rudyard Kipling's answer to people who objected to his talking of Quebec as Our Lady of the Snows. It preserves the pure type in repeating the word 'Quebec' as the end line, but otherwise not. This next illustration breaks entirely with the convention of the end line—and with others as well:

*A wonderful bird is the pelican!  
His mouth can hold more than his belican,  
He can take in his beak,  
Enough food for a week—  
I'm darned if I know how the helican.*

But the critics will have it that this is not a 'pure' limerick: and their opponents answer that it is just as 'pure' as theirs, and that if it comes to impure ones they know plenty. It is strange how literary conventions arise and literary controversies rage. The *odium theologicum* of the Middle Ages is not yet dead, nor the angers of the Reformation cooled: the ground is merely shifted from Litanies to Limericks.

Comic verse may be at the same time parody, or it may be mock-heroic as already discussed. When parody is made with a deliberate aim at brevity and condensation as part of its merit, we have what may be called epigrammatic parody. This may often be very simply achieved by cutting off the head and tail of well-known poems and putting them together with the middle left out. The effect is often

most felicitous, bringing a pleasant shock of surprise over the fact that apparently the middle wasn't necessary:

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

2. *It was the schooner Hesperus that sailed the wintry sea;  
The skipper he blew a whiff from his pipe,  
A frozen corpse was he.*

The ingenious student of effects will find plenty of other examples lying to hand. The method may be varied by mixing two poems together:

1. *Under a spreading chestnut tree the village smithy stands,  
His breast is bare, his matted hair lies buried in the sands.*

Or compare Thomas Hood's half-and-half of mixed Tennyson:

2. *Lady Clara Vere de Vere,  
I hardly know what I must say.  
But I'm to be Queen of the May, Mother,  
I'm to be Queen of the May.*

Effects that are dubious either as art or taste, but apt to be pleasing to the simple mind, can be got from epigrammatic poetry made of such mixtures of two parts of Milton with one of Dryden, etc. It is, however, rather the ingenuity of the exercise that pleases than the lasting value of the result; just as a crossword puzzle when solved gives nothing.

Epigrammatic verse is sometimes used to convey in a merry and inoffensive fashion what would otherwise sound either very dull or very offensive. Thus one might say, "The older and more aristocratic families of Boston are very exclusive." That would sound as dull as a book of *Travels in North America in 1840*. One might say, "In Boston the Lowell family think themselves so important that they won't talk to anybody but God Almighty." That would sound vulgar and offensive and untrue. But try it in Dr. Bushnell's happy stanza:

*I come from good old Boston,  
The home of the bean and the cod,  
Where the Cabots speak only to Lowells  
And the Lowells speak only to God.*

But the best use of Epigrammatic Comic Poetry, and its most typical use in our time, is for conveying real meaning with surprising and ingenious brevity. The ‘tabloid’ form suits the hurry of our life: either that or its opposite, refuge from hurry by forgetting time altogether. Thus we have pictures that flash the news of four continents in four minutes; and others that hold for three hours an audience transported to other worlds. We must have something impossibly long or unexpectedly short; a novel to take in the whole American Civil War, Negroes included, or an utterance so condensed that it can be said in what the Lady Mayoress of New York once called ‘a mouthful.’ Examples of these are seen in such conceits as Mr. Arthur Guiterman’s varied and bright little fancies in the current New York press, or in Mr. E. C. Bentley’s estimate of the mighty dead such as the following:

*Sir Christopher Wren  
Said, “I’m going to dine with some men.  
If anybody calls  
Say I am designing St. Paul’s.”*

There could be a minor division put in here alongside of parody, mock-heroic and epigram and before coming to Comic Poetry Proper. This could be named after some such fashion as Verbal and Dialectic Comic Poetry. It would include various forms of comic verse which are based simply on funny verbal forms: for example,

*There once were some people called Sioux  
Who spent all their time making shioux  
Which they coloured in various Hioux;  
Don’t think that they made them to ioux  
Oh! no, they just sold them for Bioux.*

This is not the humor of bad spelling: indeed it involves a laugh at good spelling. Its point, as far as it has any, is in the sheer oddity of the similarity where we expect dissimilarity. Closely similar in its basis is the delightful *Gallop of Analogies*, in which, on the ground that as the fish called a chub is also called a chavender, Mr. St. Leger turns a ‘pub’ into a ‘pavender’ and turns lavender into ‘lub.’

Alongside of this one may place what Harry Graham called Poetical Economy, the use of beheaded words which convey the sense just as well with their heads off and save time and make rhyme:

When I've a syllable de trop,  
I cut it off without apol:  
This verbal sacrifice, I know,  
May irritate the schol.  
But all must praise my dev'lish cunn.  
Who realize that Time is Mon.

Here belong all comic verses which get their fun out of the use of technical terms transferred to common use. In the *Lawyer's Lullaby* we have a song beginning "Be still, my child, remain *in statu quo*, while father rocks the cradle to and fro."

Among the Verbal Forms, but lying, as it were, crosswise of it and overlapping with other things, are all the various verses in which the use of dialect supplies all or some of the attempted humor. All language becomes 'funny' when it's *wrong*: that it is so sets a sort of degradation and a laugh at language itself. Broken English is 'funny'; not logically but just as a fact. A little playlet, *The Two Milords or The Blow of Thunder*, appearing in an American magazine in the current year, exploits this idea. The characters of the play presented, "in the order of their apparition, include first, Milord Sir Ross—Ancient Remnant of old High Scotch, sufficiently aged. He will never see again the quarantine, in effect, one would say well the sixantine. But he guards always the high and erect tail of the Scottish race. Sir Ross has adventured himself on the Finance of the French Purse at Paris." And after him other dramatis personæ similarly introduced.

Now dialect, till it loses its force by custom, has a droll sound to an unaccustomed ear: as witness the everlasting vogue of comic Yiddish-American, comic Negro talk and Pennsylvania Dutch. Ever so much poetry, or rather verse, filtered through this medium, has come and gone. When dialect verse is used not so much to convey the humorous effect as to supply the *setting*, to make vivid and real the surroundings, that is something else again: it is the part of *situation* and *character* and not of words. The appropriateness and point of any particular verses would be a matter of taste. Here is a sample of one of the most celebrated pieces of dialect stuff ever written—the opening verse of Charles Godfrey Leland's *Hans Breitmann's Barty*, the dialect being Pennsylvania Dutch American, *anno domini* 1856, in which designation Dutch means Deutsch (German) and has nothing to do with Holland. The Pennsylvania Dutch came from the Palatinates:

*Hans Breitmann gif a barty;  
Dey had biano-blayin'  
I fell'd in luf mit a 'Merican frau,  
Her name vas Madilda Yane.  
She hat haar ash prown ash a pretzel,  
Her eyes vas himmel-plue,  
Und ven dey looket indo mine,  
Dey shplit mine heart in doo.*

Personally, I should have no difficulty about how to classify *Hans Breitmann* if taken as an isolated fact. But we must remember that to people who live beside a broken form of their own language in friendly neighborhood, the dialect takes on something familiar and homelike that attracts. Thus do we feel in Canada about French-Canadian habitant-English. Thus did the Americans no doubt feel towards Pennsylvania Dutch American, while it lasted, and the Southerners towards the accent that came out of Africa. The dialect becomes pleasant and humorous in itself: any kind of 'damn foolishness' in it seems funny.

But here is dialect stuff used as setting and character:

*Say, there! P'r'aps  
Some of you chaps  
Might know Jim Wild?  
Well, no offence,  
There ain't no sense  
In getting riled.*

Readers of this don't need to be told that this must either be by John Hay in the *Pike County Ballads*, or Bret Harte talking of Calaveras County, or some such bard; and the locus must be in a Western bar-room. The dialect is fitted to the conversational character of the rough-but-kind miner. But contrast the technique of Bret Harte's *Truthful James* in which the language is so elevated as to lift up the whole of Calaveras County with it.

Comic Verse Proper, or pure comic verse, is distinguished by the fact that it has sense to it, and is not a parody or parasite of anything else. It may, or may not, use puns or jingling rhymes or verbal effects, but it does not depend on them. It may in its form and metre suggest, and thus in part satirize, other and serious poems, but that is not the essential thing. Comic Verse Proper has its own story and its own point. A perfect example is found in W. S. Gilbert's *Etiquette*, a poem that is

included in the volume *More Bab Ballads*. It tells how the loss of a passenger ship at sea left two English gentlemen stranded upon a desert isle. Unfortunately they had not been introduced to one another on board ship and so, *being gentlemen*, they had no way to make one another's acquaintance. By tacit consent each kept to his own end of the island. It was a fertile place with no trouble about food: but unfortunately Mr. Somers's end abounded in turtle, which he didn't like and couldn't eat: while Mr. Peter Gray, who loved turtle, found himself with nothing but oysters, which he abominated, but on which Mr. Somers doted. Thus their life was strained and limited till by a happy chance one of them, soliloquizing, as solitary castaways must do, happened to mention 'Robinson.' This, as the name of a common friend of the two of them, allowed Mr. Somers, with great delicacy, to introduce himself. Acquaintance readily made blossomed into close friendship. Turtle was exchanged for oysters. Life was all happiness. Alas! how short! A convict ship put into the island to get water, and there in a convict suit was a rather decent-looking fellow 'rowing stroke'—Robinson! Somers and Gray each felt that he had been guilty of an over-ready eagerness to introduce himself to a man who was the friend of a convict. After the convict ship sailed away, the two gentlemen, again by consent, drew apart each to his own end of the island.

*To allocate the island they agreed by word of mouth,  
And Peter takes the North again, and Somers takes the South;  
And Peter has the oysters, which he loathes with horror grim,  
And Somers has the turtle—turtle disagrees with him.*

Now this is just perfect! The theme is all there, the delightful satire on the overdone code of Victorian etiquette and of what a 'gentleman' could do and couldn't do! It could be written as a story, as a little play, as a monologue, anything. The exquisite technique of the verse must be noted. For true comic poetry every line must be written in natural language, so simple as to seem inevitable. There must be none of the strain and twist of Milton, no poetic licence. People who try to write comic verse and don't know how, reveal their ineptitude in just this way; strained syllables with an incorrect accentuation forced on them to fit the metre, or in forms used for the sake of rhyme or metre but not used in ordinary speech. That kind of stuff is all right for Milton, but it didn't do for W. S. Gilbert or Owen Seaman or Harry Graham, nor does it do to-day for E. V. Knox or Mr. Arthur Guiterman. It is a mark of good comic verse that at times the very simplicity, the 'effortlessness' of the metre and rhyme, make it, most oddly and amusingly, seem to turn back into ordinary speech. Compare in the poem before us the actual meeting of the two

gentlemen when Mr. Gray ‘breaks the ice.’

*“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!”*

Observe the charming colloquialism of, “I happened to be by”: and the ultra-gentlemanly phrase, “Allow me!” A true gentleman has to keep on apologizing for living.

But on the contrary notice here and there a weak line:

“How they wished an introduction to each other they had had.” That sounds like a note out of tune on the piano.

Lewis Carroll often showed a masterly touch in this ultra-simplicity of language. In *The Hunting of the Snark* we read:

*There was one who was famed for the number of things  
He forgot when he entered the ship:  
His umbrella, his watch, all his jewels and rings,  
And the clothes he had bought for the trip.*

The language is so ‘damn’ simple! A boy would say it just that way, and the last line is priceless, it just fades off into a sentence so familiar that it vanishes. Look at the text of the poem, since there is no space here for further quotation, and you will see that this is only one of a string of successive stanzas with the same fade-away tail-end line. But one further quotation of the artless excellence and the excellent artlessness of the Snark must be permitted. The Bellman, the leader of the expedition, discovered that the butcher engaged on board the ship only knew how to kill beaver and nothing else.

*But at length he explained in a tremulous tone,  
There was only one beaver on board,  
And that was a tame one he had of his own  
Whose loss would be deeply deplored.*

A tame one *he had of his own*! Exquisite. Milton could never have thought of that, nor Tennyson. He’d have said:

*A tame one, for he knew its tameness well  
In his own byre and housed within his heart.*

Incidentally the student should remark that the *Snark* is not Pure Comic Poetry but Mock-Heroic. But the significance of artlessness applies to both. One does not like to overstress an obvious point, but if there are such things as students of humorous writing they cannot realize too fully that comic verse to be acceptable must be either rotten or perfect. There is no room in between. See how even such an artist as Captain Harry Graham can write a stanza with the first four lines perfect to the point of happy laughter and fall down in the last couplet by trying to pretend that handkerchief is pronounced handkercheef. The subject is 'the Baritone,' from whom all have suffered.

*His low-necked collar fails to show  
The contours of his manly chest,  
Since that has fallen far below  
His 'fancy evening vest.'  
Here, too, in picturesque relief,  
Nestles his crimson handkerchief.*

Critics might argue that the line is strained on purpose, a forced rhyme 'for fun.' But I don't think so. Unity would be better. Compare the sustained majesty of thought of a stanza by Mr. E. V. Knox on fat men. The very grandeur and sweep of the language makes it humorous. One false syllable would let it break under the strain, but there isn't one:

*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.*

Of the well-known humorous verse of England and America one might cite as further examples of comic verse proper Bret Harte's *Society upon the Stanislaus*; certain of Kipling's *Departmental Ditties*; *The Laird o' Cockpen*; *The Night Before Christmas*.

There are countless others. These are only mentioned to make clear what is meant.

## Chapter VII

### HUMOROUS POETRY: THE UNDERTONES

In all the forms of versification discussed in the last chapter the aim was primarily, or overwhelmingly, merriment, amusement. Incidentally, of course, a didactic or satirical element appears, as when in *Etiquette* the rigid British code of how to behave like a gentleman is held up to ridicule. But mainly the fun's the thing.

But now let us move a little farther from nonsense, a little bit nearer to sublimity—the gamut that humor runs. We find here a class of poems—the word begins to fit better than verse—in which under the light form there is a deeper shade of meaning; the laughter flickers on the surface like sunshine over rising waters. Here in ascending order are such poems as *Jim Bludso*, *Julie Plante*, *Gunga Din* and *My Lord Tom Noddy* (Barham's *The Execution*). Jim Bludso burns to death clinging to the steering-wheel of the river steamer the *Prairie Bell*, refusing to quit his post till the “last galoot's ashore.” Not very ‘funny’ that, is it? The woodscow *Julie Plante* goes down on Lake St. Pierre (sunk by Dr. W. H. Drummond) and the captain and his wife wash up as corpses. No big laugh in that. Gunga Din, army water-bearer, drilled by a bullet, murmurs as he dies that he hopes his master likes the drink. Hardly a smile there. And in *The Execution*, which my Lord Tom Noddy didn't see after all because he fell asleep over cards and whisky while waiting for it, the criminal walks to the gallows with a “pale, wan man's mute agony.” It is hard to get the fun of that.

How, then, could such themes ever have been written up, and attained deserved celebrity, as verse of a humorous character? I think it is on the principle of comic relief and still more of control or restraint of emotion. If we're going to talk about the burning of the *Prairie Bell* we're not going to cry over it—no, nor about Gunga Din! Both Jim Bludso and Gunga would rather that we had a laugh over it.

We are, as it were, divided between our natural desire for *emotion*, our desire to admire heroism, denounce villainy, and cry over suffering and our equally natural desire not to be mawkish about it. This rough stuff supplies us with a happy medium.

*Jim Bludso* was written, as a sin of early youth, among the *Pike County Ballads* (1871) of John Hay (1838-1905). Hay was a brilliant youth of Indiana in its pioneer days, hatched out from rusticity by Brown University, and writing letters in not-half-bad French to astonished sweethearts at home. Incidentally he saw a lot of the pioneer life of what we now call the Middle West. He became secretary to Abraham Lincoln, as president-elect and throughout the war as president, and later wrote, along with his fellow secretary, Nicolai, the famous biography. He was in old

age Secretary of State to Theodore Roosevelt and left his name in the Hay-Pauncefote treaty that 'fixed' the Panama Canal. No wonder that such a distinguished old gentleman felt ashamed, so at least it is said, of having written poems in the 'Wal! I swan!' dialect of the West to tell how 'Jim Bludso passed in his checks' (a new railroad metaphor—baggage, not banks) 'the night of the *Prairie Bell*.' He was probably ashamed of such a climax verse as:

*There-was runnin' and cursin', but Jim yelled out,  
Over all the infernal roar;  
"I'll hold her nozzle agin the bank  
Till the last galoot's ashore."*

Yet the poem has been recited at a thousand school entertainments, and read out over a thousand campfires, and even in wainscoted libraries. It belongs to the large class of things that ought not to get over but do. Still more painful perhaps to the Honorable Mr. John Hay would have been the over-obvious orthodoxy of the final verse:

*He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing,—  
And went for it thar and then;  
And Christ ain't a-going to be too hard  
On a man that died for men.*

The *Pike County Ballads* belong to the earlier phase of writing up the West, which is a perennial ground of interest and adventure. The central theme in those days was to show that the West was rough but good. Nowadays with the moving pictures, the scenes of great rapidity, the ride of the sheriff's horse, the bandits leaping off trains and blowing up banks with nitro-glycerine, the West is written up (or flickered up) to show not that it is rough but good, but that it is highly civilized but damn bad. It's pleasant for the audience to realize that there's still lots of crime somewhere if you look for it. Thus change, on the surface, life, literature and humor all together: down below nothing changes—or little.

Very likely young John Hay, dreaming of epic poems and romances still to be composed, would have felt ashamed and saddened to think that from his *Ballads* he would sink down to write the biography of a president, and that all he would compose in old age would be a canal treaty.

Of peculiar interest to the critical student is the *Wreck of the Julie Plante*. This is one of the famous habitant poems of the late Dr. W. H. Drummond of Montreal. The language in which they are written is intended to represent the English used by

French-Canadian country people. Unfortunately it appears at times to have been mistaken for the language of French Canada, which is a gross libel (see M. Ernest Martin's interesting brochure, *Le Français des Canadiens*).

The *Julie Plante* may be put alongside the famous ballad of the *Bugaboo*. This latter ship, 'large and tall and beautiful,' turns out to be a canal boat loading turf in the Teraulay Street Canal, Dublin. She is of one horsepower—an actual horse reported in each refrain as 'doing his best.' The Captain, carelessly smoking, sets the *Bugaboo* on fire. She burns to the water edge, a marine disaster of entirely comic setting with no real pathos or meaning—just mock-heroic. The *Julie Plante* is a woodscow. That is correct and properly comic. She's on 'Lac St. Pierre.' That isn't. Lake St. Peter, an enlargement of the St. Lawrence between Montreal and Quebec, is too big for fun, forty miles by twelve. Lord Ullen's daughter got drowned in Loch Lochgyle in a full-sized stage storm in water perhaps one-hundredth the area.

*For the win 'she blow lak hurricane  
Bimeby she blow some more,  
An 'de scow bus 'up on Lac St. Pierre  
Wan arpent from de shore.*

So the Captain "call de crewe from up de hole, he call the cook also." "De cook, she's name was Rosie, she come from Montreal." So she might, without there being anything funny about it.

*Then de Captinne tak de Rosie girl  
An 'tie her to de mas',  
Den he also tak de life preserve  
An 'jump off on de lak'  
An 'say "Good by, me Rosie dear,  
I go drown for you sake."*

What is this? Is it meant to be funny or is it the Schooner *Hesperus* à la St. Pierre? I confess I fail to get it. Nor is it improved when the Captain and Rosie are duly reported as "corpses on de shore." Many of Dr. Drummond's poems, as judged according to the principles laid down, hit the mark just right. Compare *How Bateese Came Home*, which is charming. But it seems to me that the *Julie Plante* offends against the first canon of humor, namely that it must not be malicious, bitter or involve real suffering. Later on in this chapter the point is more fully discussed. But there seems an evident danger of such breach of taste in this particular class of verse, dealing with death and danger. We have to be quite sure just what we are laughing

at. I think Rosie had better have stayed in Montreal.

*Gunga Din*, on the other hand, is just right. The Latins used to say, *Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus verum creditum id verum est*. And similarly what everybody everywhere always thinks a good thing, must be a good thing. To how many happy occasions can one look back in the pre-war days, on which the chairman rose and knocked on the banquet table and said, "Gentlemen, we are now to be favoured with a recitation of *Gunga Din*." The Great War buried *Gunga Din* under a million heroes, but he went strong for half a generation, and has now joined the *Boy on the Burning Deck* and *John Maynard* and the *Boy at Ratisbon* who gave the message to Napoleon when he was really all the time in two halves.

*Gunga Din* is usually classed as light or humorous verse and appears as such in anthologies. But in reality it almost passes out of it: it is not *comic* in the ordinary sense and not meant to be: but it is humorous in the last and final sense in the presentation of the contrast of little *Gunga Din*'s humble station and high character. It suggests Huckleberry Finn's mean surroundings and his elevated soul.

A very interesting study of the technique of comic verse is offered by the poem *The Execution* that is published among the famous *Ingoldsby Legends* of Richard Barham (1788-1845). The author, whose *nom de plume* was Thomas Ingoldsby, was a minor canon of St. Paul's. The *Ingoldsby Legends*, in addition to great cleverness of rhyme and antiquarian interest, are based to a great extent on deriding the 'superstitions' of the Church of Rome. It is hard to see how the *Legends* 'got by' except that Victorian England was a peculiar place and that people were still brought up on Foxe's (ghastly) *Book of Martyrs*. If seven sacraments are silly, then two sacraments are two-sevenths as silly. If it is funny that the Jackdaw of Rheims withers under a cardinal's curse, then let the Archbishop of Canterbury take a curse at him. If "*Roger the Monk got excessively drunk*," what about Rural Dean Smith? In other words, in point of superstition and of practice the two churches are pretty much pot and kettle. Seen from the outside, or by a Roman Catholic, the *Ingoldsby Legends* break the mould in which true humor is cast.

But the poem called *The Execution*, though bound with the *Legends*, is not of them. It is a denunciation of public executions, still practised at that time in England. It depicts My Lord Tom Noddy and his friends 'staging a party' to sit up all night so as to see an execution next morning. The interesting technical point is that in order to include in the poem comic and tragic elements they are put into separate compartments. We see My Lord Tom Noddy and his friends at their merriment:

*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”!*

Then while they lie in drunken stupor the beautiful morning wakes to life, and with it a human life is taken—

*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.*

Then, in order to end with proper art, we are taken back to the awakening of the revellers:

*“Hollo! Hollo! 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 Tom Noddy went home to bed!*

All this is wonderfully well done, with instinctive art. One wonders all the time—and students especially might wonder—whether there can be any other art than instinctive, and whether, even in such a simple field as that of humor, anything in higher excellence can be gained by the study of principles. Did Barham need to study humor?—or Sydney Smith study puns?—or Mark Twain *learn* innocence to go abroad with it? The answer to it all, I think, lies in Horace’s dictum, “*Doctrina vim promovet insitam.*” The very doing is a form of study, even if done with unconscious art. I imagine that as a matter of fact all humorists have studied humor—unconsciously. Dickens studied attitudes for hours before a glass. Mark Twain wrote reams and reams to throw away. Robert Louis Stevenson picked up his words with tweezers, as carefully as you move spilikins. Care, study and conscious purpose *must* be worth while: else is our faith vain.

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Moving still upwards, like the ‘excelsior boy,’ or the ‘high-boy,’ of Mr. Benchley,

we pass to verse where the humorous element is used for a purpose, satire. The main aim is no longer to amuse, but to make amusement a vehicle of purpose. Satire may be of a dozen kinds and used for a dozen purposes. It may be personal, malicious, diabolical: or political and colorless, just a stick to beat a dog. But humor is the very life of it.

Those who know the history of poetic literature in England and America will not need to be reminded of such apposite examples as:

*“Great praise the Duke of Marlbro’ won,  
And our good prince Eugene.”*

*“Why, ’twas a very wicked thing!”  
Said little Wilhelmine.*

*“Nay . . . nay . . . my little girl,” quoth he,  
“It was a famous victory.”*

Or to match James Russell Lowell with Southey:

*We were gittin’ on nicely up here to our village,  
With good old ideas o’ wut’s right an’ wut ain’t,  
We kind o’ thought Christ went agin war an’ pillage,  
An’ that eppyletts worn’t the best mark of a saint;  
But John P.  
Robinson, he  
Sez this kind o’ thing’s an exploded idee.*

I have in other writings and in lecturing so often cited certain verses of G. K. Chesterton as a perfect embodiment of the effectiveness of humor in satire that I have no hesitation in citing them again. They are entitled *Antichrist, or the Reunion of Christendom: An Ode*, and refer to the Welsh Church Disestablishment Bill of a quarter of a century ago. Those who do not know what the Welsh Church Disestablishment Bill was may be informed that it was a Bill to disestablish the Welsh Church. The outside world never heard of it. The major part of Christendom didn’t know where Wales is, didn’t know that it has a Church and had no idea what would happen to it if you disestablished it.

It was characteristic of F. E. Smith (the late Lord Birkenhead) that he denounced the Bill, with the grandiose invective he so well commanded (and which never deceived himself), as having “shocked the conscience of all Christendom!”

It was equally characteristic of G. K. Chesterton that he could prick the bubble of windy invective with the sharp point of humor. The opening verse is a model:

*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?*

An even stronger note is struck in the famous verses by Thomas Hood called *The Song of the Shirt*, published anonymously in the Christmas number of *Punch*, 1843. This was written in the days of the hopeless and submerged poverty, the sweated labor, and the 'cry of the children,' of the good old days when Queen Victoria was young. No race of savages ever touched a lower level, economically, than the lowest working-class of merry England a hundred years ago. To die of sudden want is nothing; to live in want and not to die is appalling in its very continuity.

*The Song of the Shirt* is not 'comic' poetry except in form. Deadlier earnestness was never penned. More scathing denunciation of social injustice was never written. Nor ever was greater effect produced on public opinion by private words. But the effect is heightened, the satire goes deeper, the pathos is more intense because the form is 'comic,' because the cry of distress is voiced to the happy lilt of merriment:

*With fingers weary and worn,  
With eyelids heavy and red,  
A Woman sat in unwomanly rags,  
Plying her needle and thread—  
Stitch! stitch! stitch!  
In poverty, hunger, and dirt,  
And still with a voice of dolorous pitch  
She sang the "Song of the Shirt!"*

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Before moving on to the final stage in which humor in verse is divested of mere

comicality and becomes one with reflection and pathos, we turn aside for a moment to consider the verses that failed to come off, the poetry that missed its mark, and turned comic, as grape juice ferments into wine. This general division could be called *Bad Poetry*, but it also runs from lower to higher forms, culminating in the super-comic or poetry of inspired idiocy. We may begin with some simple and easy forms of bad poetry, comic from its very badness. Here, first, we take Deplorable Poetry. This, as already said, is found as free copy in any moral, well-conducted paper. It deals with spring, the early daffodils, the might of England, the New Year (including the death of the old year), the sea, and solitude in the woods. Its lines carry enough poetic licence to run a liquor store: its feet wobble, its metre is like the sound of coupling cars. But its tone is high. It has a moral quality which in the long run makes it necessary to newspapers, particularly to ones that have fireside editions and hearth-and-home circulation. Sometimes the poetry is signed “aged 10,” but that makes no difference: “aged 80” wouldn’t lift it up.

It seems hardly fair to give examples. I select a short one, *à page ouverte*, from a garden of such verses. It is evidently a gladsome poem of a wedding morn. The author is—and ought to be—unknown.

*Oh never, never she'll forget  
The happy, happy day  
When in the Church, before God's priest,  
She gave herself away.*

The irresistible fit of composition which produces Deplorable Poetry is especially induced by the contemplation of nature. People of minds constitutionally feeble are unable to withstand the sudden shock of stupendous natural scenery. It is notorious that on the great scenic route of the Canadian Pacific System, passengers reach for pencils and start to scribble “So this is the St. Lawrence!” or, aghast at the Rocky Mountains, “So this is Banff!” Often it isn’t: it’s Sicamous, but that doesn’t matter.

From Deplorable we move on to Execrable Poetry, which, as already explained, is the term here adopted for bad poetry as written by Homer when he nods, by Tennyson when he tries to be Tennyson, or by any poet of talent encouraged till he gets silly. As already said, many examples of this kind of comic verse appear in the admirable compilation called *The Stuffed Owl* (1930). The industrious student might commit to memory Tennyson’s description of Enoch Arden selling fish, which Arden appears to have put into ‘*ocean-smelling osier*’ so that his customers mistook it for ‘*ocean spoil*.’ In the opinion of Mr. Wyndham Lewis and Mr. Charles Lee, who compiled the book, Longfellow’s *Excelsior* qualifies for a place, a judgment which

they support with a scholarly discussion as to whether the young man should not rather have said ‘excelsius’ (adverb) rather than ‘excelsior’ (adjective). The nice point involved has since been indirectly settled by Mr. Robert C. Benchley in an extract already quoted when he introduces the term ‘haut-boy’ or ‘high-boy.’ This ‘excelsior’ boy was higher still. But we will all agree with the compiler that Longfellow’s suggestion “that village maidens in Switzerland are in the habit of inviting complete strangers to lay their heads upon their virgin breasts, is an unwarrantable slur on the morals of a British dependency.” Personally, I think that the trouble with *Excelsior* is that it moves on too high ground. The ‘youth’ is so heroic, flashing like a falchion and ringing like a clarion, the ‘homes’ are so happy, the ‘old man’ (obviously a Swiss professor) so very informative, the ‘maiden’ so ‘easy,’ the monks so pious that we just can’t hold it. Virtue thus unadorned grows sickly: if there had been even one in the lot against him—a speed cop or a tax collector—the boy might have got by. But, after all, he *did*.

Wordsworth, of course, fills a goodly proportion of space in this same delightful book and quite deservedly. Indeed, his own peculiar theory that poetry must be simple led him to walk right into it. Everyone recalls his famous lines, “*A Mr. Wilkinson, a clergyman*”; “*A household tub like one of those Which women use to wash their clothes*”; “*She was eight years old, she said.*” Yet even the text of Wordsworth can be improved upon if read, here and there, with a slight variant of emphasis. Everyone recalls the mawkish and sentimental *Highland Girl*; little better than an outbreak of amorous senility. Wordsworth gushes out in it—

*What joy to hear thee, and to see!  
Thy elder Brother I would be,  
Thy Father—anything to thee!*

But a schoolboy in one of my classes nearly fifty years ago brought it within the bounds of restraint by reading it as—“*What joy to hear thee and to see thy elder brother! I would be thy father*” . . .

If Wordsworth had stuck to that, he would have been a better, perhaps a cleaner man.

What Wordsworth did half on purpose, others did by carelessness or over-conceit. The poet Thomas Campbell (1777-1844) filled the rôle of what one might call the pride of Britain. He wrote *Hohenlinden*, and *Ye Mariners of England*, and the *Battle of the Baltic*. Yet he was also capable of writing—

*Earl March looked on his dying child,  
And, smit with grief to view her—  
“The youth,” he cried, “whom I exiled  
Shall be restored to woo her.”*

The charming combination “*to woo her*” sounds wonderfully like an owl in the woods. Campbell not only was capable of writing this but Dr. Palgrave was capable of including it in his collection as a ‘golden treasure.’ It certainly is.

The interest in this particular kind of poetry is not only literary but psychological. *Why* does Homer nod? Can’t he keep awake? At times that is the reason, as when a writer of poetry writes so much that by sheer exhaustion some of it must be bad. And at times, of course, when writers write with both eyes on money instead of only one, some of their work is bound to turn foolish. Here prose enjoys the merits of its own defects: since it lives less on form it never gets as silly as silly poetry. But there is another reason still which I think accounts for a lot of ‘rotten’ poetry. People get spoiled, or at least damaged, by success. In point of companionship and amiability, people who succeed are not as a rule as easy and tolerant as people who have failed. They get opinionative and at times, in the case of genius, like Dickens, dictatorial and egotistical beyond words. So with their art. Too much praise overfeeds them as too much water does a plant. With overpraise a storyteller becomes a bore, a humorist grows tiresome, and a poet gets silly. Affectation takes the place of reality. Nothing but the wholesome corrective of other people’s laughter can effect a cure. To have made an ass of oneself, and know it, is the beginning of better things.

It is very probable that a great many of our best-known hymns belong in this class of Execrable Verse. But it is not for us to say so. I recall that many years ago a Chicago professor of English ventured to state in the press that many of the hymns of the Church are doggerel. The fat was in the fire at once. Illogical people at once asked whether *Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom* was doggerel and how anyone could dare to apply the word doggerel to such beautiful lines as *Abide with me; fast falls the eventide*. The professor was ‘in bad’: and if the fat was in the fire over such a topic in Chicago, what would it be elsewhere?

The real point is that there are certain things we don’t say, certain things we leave alone provided that neither duty nor truth nor interest compels us to consider them, certain reticences and reverences that are a part of our common inheritance. The law of blasphemy, in all nations and for all creeds, is based on this idea. The South Sea Islanders call it *taboo* and the North Sea Islanders call it ‘good form.’ If

things are sacred we do not make fun of them: a ‘comic bible,’ such as the one published in France at the beginning of the anti-clericalism of the Third Republic, is an offence even to an unbeliever. There is a province marked off as ‘unjokable’: to intrude on it only brings humor into disrepute, especially with people inclined in any case to think it disreputable. If our hymns, therefore, in many instances are filled with mixed metaphors, weird figures of speech and sung to wheezing tunes as slow as a blacksmith’s bellows, let us make no capital out of the fact. Our hymns are sacred from their associations: they have been with us these long generations: the shouting unison of loyalty pardons the doggerel verses of *God Save the King*: the pride of stout hearts still swells over the feeble egotism of *Rule, Britannia*. Our hymns have been with us in the routine of immemorable Sundays, in the merriment of uncounted christenings and Christmases, on the decks of sinking ships, and in last whispered farewells of eternal parting.

The topic is not raised here for the fun of it, but only as means of emphasizing the limitations of the principles of true humor. In it malice has no place, nor the degradation of things sacred to others. It is a lesson to be learned and remembered. Nor can humor, even where it is meant to be merely comic and harmless, venture to associate itself with images or recollections of pain, cruelty and death. Just as we must not jest over sacred things, so we must not jest over death except in the mock bravery of hysteria in danger or in the challenge of defiance. In the well-known song composed and sung during a plague outbreak in India, the lines, “*Here’s a health to the dead already and a hurrah for the next that dies!*” are not a false attempt at humor but a brave attempt at defiance. It is hard to be commonplace in supreme moments.

We find, as usual, exceptions that ‘prove’ the rule, which means properly and originally *test* it, try it out. Revert again to the striking stanza:

*Small Boy,  
Pair of skates,  
Hole in ice,  
Heavenly Gates.*

Here is death (including resurrection) and yet no offence whatsoever. It is so generalized that it doesn’t count. The actual drowning of a real child would be too heartbreaking for a jest. But this is a mere hypothesis. Let it be granted that a boy went skating. It’s no worse than when in Euclid a triangle falls on a parallelogram.

Unpardonable Verse is the name given to comic verse written by poets laureate, academicians and songsters *ex officio* to celebrate occasions. People whose

memories can carry back to the Victorian Jubilee of 1887 may recall J. M. Barrie's delightful account in *My Lady Nicotine* (a treasure of humor) of the writing of Jubilee Odes. But people whose memory only carries back in 1937 can find good examples, though no one need get spiteful about it. Official poetry, as of laureates, belonged to a different age, an age with no current press and telegraph: you *needed* a poet at a banquet just as you needed a man to play the harp and a jester to play the fool. And what the poet said, or sung, blew away as lightly as the smoke up the great chimney. There was no world press to print it and parody it. Here and there the string of words fell like a rosary of gems: they were not lost, except that no one remembered who it was first said them. Who wrote, for example, the old, old verses on the ivy and the holly?

*Holly and his Merrie Men  
They dancen and they sing,  
Ivy and her Maidens  
They weepen and they wring!*

Nowadays the appointment to the laureateship should carry with it a sort of gentleman's agreement not to write any more poetry.

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At the topmost reach of comic bad poetry is found what may be very fittingly called Super-Comic Poetry, which is the production of inspired idiocy. It stands parallel in its aim and inspiration to the highest form of poetic effort. But it is written by people who never had the education to give them the power to express it. They have the thought but they can't say it, or rather, worse still, they think they have said it when they haven't. It is a case of high voltage passed through a small wire: and just as an electric current in such circumstances blows out a fuse, so super-comic poetry blows out the fuse of seriousness into the explosion of a laugh. The super-comic poet is an intensely serious person: he feels all the tragedy of life: he thrills at its emotions: he sorrows at its inevitable end. But all he can say is "Oh my!" The super-comic poet deals by preference with topics of a major class—death, accidents of all kind, steam preferred, bereavement, and great national celebrations. He likes to find a young man drowned and write a dirge on him: or to have a 'maiden' washed up by the sea (there are plenty if you look for them). But sometimes, more as an act of friendship than art, he'll write off a piece on *Mr. William Smith's Prize Holstein Cow*.

It is difficult to quote super-comic poetry and preserve good taste because so much of it deals with actual events of poignant suffering or with things such as an

epitaph on a wife, or a wreath on the grave of a child, that are beyond the bounds of laughter. But here is a safe and universal topic, Napoleon. It is a pity that he didn't live to see himself summarized so happily.

*Napoleon hoped that all the world would fall beneath his sway;  
He failed in his ambition; and where is he to-day?  
Neither the Nations of the East nor the Nations of the West  
Have thought the thing Napoleon thought was to their interest.*

A Canadian super-comic poet broke out into grief at the loss of the *Titanic* with a sustained poem which began:

*My! what an awful night they had,  
The night that boat went down . . .*

But one must not quote further. The effort was followed and eclipsed by an American poet who chronicled an appalling naval disaster with a lament containing the stanza:

*Entrapped inside a submarine,  
With death approaching on the scene,  
The crew compose their minds to dice,  
More for the Pleasure than the Vice.*

Some super-comic poets have attained a wide celebrity. Their work being highly saleable, for reasons obvious to us and not to them, their names widely known, they find themselves persons of distinction and rate themselves very highly. After all, what other evidence had Lord Tennyson of his poetical merit than what they have. People bought his books and read them with rapture. Super-comic poets flourish better in the new English-speaking world than in England. The old country lacks latitude of thought, and a super-comic, or higher idiot, poet is apt to get 'canned' before he gets started. English super-comic poets never get above pure twaddle more or less orthodox in rhyme and structure, but as feeble as pulp compared with the vigorous growth under a newer sky. Just as Dickens (see *Pickwick*, Chapter VII) tells us that if Muggleton has its Dumkins and Dingley Dell its Luffey, so we can boast that Ontario has its McIntyre and Michigan its Julia Moore of the late nineteenth century. The latter was probably the greatest super-comic poet who has lived since Milton. Her success was great; her fame extensive; her estimate of herself was in accordance. One poem of hers dealt with the terrible railway accident at Ashtabula, Ohio, in 1878.

*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.*

I quoted that passage as an illustration in my larger work on the present subject and often referred to it in public lectures, but I quote it here again for a special purpose. When I was lecturing in Chicago a few years ago, I quoted the fate of 'P. P. Bliss and wife' to what seemed the great hilarity of the audience. After the lecture, at supper, a grave, elderly gentleman said to me, "I was interested in your reference to the Ashtabula Bridge Disaster. I lived in the town as a young man at the time. Poor Bliss! I knew him quite well. He suffered terribly."

With that, for me, all the comicality of the poem was lost in the horror of the reality. I could feel what it was that the crude words and ill-assorted epithets of the Michigan 'poetess' were meant to convey. Again I realized one cannot joke with death. For some time after I couldn't refer even to the death of Rameses of Egypt, except to say, "I see poor Rameses is gone."

This incident is not related here for any personal interest, but in order to enforce again the canon of taste, Let humor keep to its bounds.

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But to turn again from the back-water of poetry comically and super-comically bad, into the broadening main stream of humor in verse that we have followed from its remoter sources. We see it here widening and expanding into a larger ocean of human thought as the St. Lawrence, flecked with wind and sunshine, widens to the sea. The final stage of its course is where humor broadens in its outlook till it becomes one with pathos and reflection, joining tears and laughter. Throughout this little work the main stress of emphasis is on that point: humor represents in its history and in its current analysis—lengthwise in time or sidewise in a cross-section of the hour—an ascending series at the bottom of which are guffaws and malice and primitive simplicity, and at the top are smiles and tears and eternity.

The humor that lies in this highest class, as seen in verse, is not of necessity the best known, nor the best. It is the quality of the class that is high, the level, but not of necessity the sample. More beautiful flowers may grow at a lower altitude, but none

with quite the serenity.

Examples are always best for explanation. Here is what is meant by humor in verse of the sublime quality. Take this drinking song:

*Drink to me only with thine eyes;  
And I will pledge with mine,  
Or leave a kiss within the cup;  
And I'll not look for wine.*

Or try this pleasant invocation addressed to youth and urging early marriage:

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may;  
Old Time is still a-flying,  
And that same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow may be dying.*

Both of these (from Ben Jonson and Herrick) carry us back to the seventeenth century: they seemed in that age to reach out so easily for this effect, at least the cheerier people did. Cromwell and his Ironsides would have preferred Julia Moore of Michigan. But the seventeenth century had no monopoly. Listen to Robert Burns when he begins:

*Wee, sleekit, cow'rin, tim'rous beastie,  
O what a panic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
Wi' bickering brattle!  
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee  
Wi' murd'ring prattle!*

Nor has the old world a monopoly, nor a past age. No one, I think, since the seventeenth century at any rate, ever caught this mood and its expression better than Oliver Wendell Holmes, of Boston, and of all the world. Those who do not know should read forthwith the poem that begins:

*I only wish a hut of stone,  
(A very plain brown stone would do)—*

The kind of humor that is here described seems to me to reflect the humor of the highest culture, the humor of the future. Its distinction is its kindliness. It does not belong to the literature of effort, of strong convictions and animating purpose. It is rather that of disillusionment, of loss of faith, and of the wide charity of mind that has

come with the shattering of narrower ideals, not yet replaced. I will quote in conclusion and at some length one further example from Oliver Wendell Holmes, not well known but typifying exactly what is here described. It is obviously humor: you can prove it: yet it is sad: but not so terribly sad: full of reflection yet expressed so easily, so lightly.

*Come, dear old comrade, you and I  
Will steal an hour from days gone by,  
The shining days when life was new,  
And all was bright with morning dew,  
The lusty days of long ago,  
When you were Bill and I was Joe . . .*

*You've won the great world's envied prize,  
And grand you look in people's eyes,  
With H.O.N. and L.L.D.  
In big brave letters, fair to see,—  
Your fist, old fellow! off they go!—  
How are you, Bill? How are you, Joe? . . .*

*Ah, pensive scholar, what is fame?  
A fitful tongue of leaping flame;  
A giddy whirlwind's fickle gust,  
That lifts a pinch of mortal dust;  
A few swift years, and who can show  
Which dust was Bill and which was Joe? . . .*

*No matter; while our home is here  
No sounding name is half so dear;  
When fades at length our lingering day,  
Who cares what pompous tombstones say?  
Read on the hearts that love us still,  
Hic jacet Joe. Hic jacet Bill.*

*Chapter VIII*  
*HUMOR AND CRAFTSMANSHIP*

Young people who have an inborn talent for drawing or music are sent, if they are lucky enough, to professional schools. No matter how great their native ability, it is presumed that it can be enlarged and developed by precept and practice. It is not derogatory to a person who paints that he tries to do it and doesn't do it by accident, that he does it of set purpose, and even in part for an ulterior motive. But there is no such general attitude towards the production of 'humor,' using the word objectively to mean humorous writing, talking or drawing. Humor is supposed to grow as a wayside flower without cultivation.

In a sense, and within limits, it is of course true that all art should be of this character. It is contaminated the moment it is connected with a money return, with an ulterior purpose, with limitations imposed by 'adaptability' to a particular periodical, and even perhaps the minute it is connected with paid teaching and studied effects. But all that is only a part of the imperfection of the world in which we live. Art cannot be entirely free and self-prompted and self-inspired. The mediæval poet Hans Sachs said that he sang as the birds did, without pay. But most of us are not birds. In any case it is probable that human talent, like human character, needs the sharp stimulus of compulsion. Art cannot be left to inspiration, nor letters to the happy flow of ink. Those who know academic life will know how many of the academic class dream away their lives, still talking of the work they mean to do and at the end fall asleep, babbling, like Falstaff, of the green fields of literature. Even with humor, which seems as spontaneous as the flight of a hummingbird, effort and purpose help achievement. There is no need, then, that humor should be left as a wayside flower. Humor—meaning the feeling of it—can be intensified by cultivation, and humor, meaning the expression of it and conveyance to others, can be taught, and native faculty heightened by effort and instruction. Personally I am quite sure that if I gave a course of lectures on the practice of humor, the students would go away from it, if not better men, at least funnier.

In a little manual like the present, it is not possible to do more than indicate a few general principles that are of use in learning to express humor in words. Students who wish to go further may refer to the larger work on the subject by the author of this volume (*Humour: Its Theory and Technique*). For a definite study-book on a college pattern, there is the new and excellent manual by Mr. A. A. Thomson, *Written Humour*. But without venturing so far into the subject readers may see much through the open gateway. In the first place humorous writing demands a very

exact knowledge of the value of words, of the *mot propre*, or of using the right word in the right place. What is still harder, the student must learn to use the wrong word in the right place, as when old Mr. Ballou, as seen above in a preceding chapter, called his fellow Westerner a 'logarithm.' Our English language as a consequence of its peculiar origin, its very much mixed ancestry, has a wealth of terms not known to any other tongue, ancient or modern. We can say a thing with Saxon words, or we can say it with Latin words, or we say it with words that have drifted to us from Rome by way of France. Each kind has its peculiar force. The Saxon words carry a more intimate feeling—like *home*, and *heart* and *hearth*, and convey the images of nature, the *sunrise*, the *dawn*, the *daylight* and *even-song* and *dark*. Latin seems to have something harder about it, but definite and exact like a steel frame. It makes *verbs* of great precision—to *deliberate*, to *expostulate*, to *terminate*, or terms that obstinately keep even their absolute Latin form to hold a technical use, such as *status quo*. One recalls again the *Lawyer's Lullaby* that begins, "Be still, my child, remain *in statu quo*, while father rocks the cradle to and fro."

Note the beautiful word 'lullaby': we could say also, 'cradle-song,' or 'epithalamion.' But when you want to make an armistice or draw up a contract a 'status quo' is better than a 'lullaby.' Compare 'alias' with one fixed and 'otherwise' with a dozen loose ones: or try to find Anglo-Saxon for an *alibi*. With the Latin we have a lot of Greek words, swallowed whole as they came to us, like 'hypothesis' as a double for 'supposition.' Then there is the class of words that passed by way of French or Provençal which seem to be distinguished as it were by their 'distinction'; they are polite words such as 'embassy' and 'embroidery' and 'tapestry,' 'surveillance' (as compared with 'invigilate' and 'watch'), 'annoyance.' Abstract diction runs greatly to these just as simplicity of nature demands Saxon. Compare, "*The curfew tolls the knell of parting day, the lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea, the Ploughman homeward plods his weary way and leaves the world to darkness and to me,*" with such later lines as "*The applause of listening senates to command,*" etc.

We are thus able in English to pick our choice for our meaning among a group of words meaning by origin the same thing but differentiated to separate shades—the *dawn*, the *sunrise*, the *daybreak*, *aurora*; the *grave-yard*, the *church-yard*, *God's acre*, the *burial ground*, the *cemetery*, the *necropolis*. These delicate shades of meaning are not learned out of a book. Only usage can teach them, and even with usage there must be appreciation and feeling towards them. This is especially the case with humor which demands for its expression the right word, the inevitable word. Take the list of meanings suggested by such a series as 'transition,'

‘change,’ ‘alteration,’ ‘interval,’ ‘shift,’ ‘evolution’—all are different and must be used with an acute sense of their meaning. Very often, in return, the absolutely correct use of a word that seems inevitable produces in itself a pleasing humorous effect. There is such an unexpected matching of words and sense that it has the shock of humor. Anyone who will read over again that admirable book of the late Sir John Barrie *My Lady Nicotine* will see that it is a very model in this respect. Each word and phrase is right and couldn’t be otherwise.

Humor further demands great ‘naturalness’ of language, the use of phrases and forms so simple that writers straining after effect would never get them. W. S. Gilbert in especial was blessed with this felicity, as seen in *Etiquette* (already quoted) and *Prince Aghib*.

So too in a high degree were Lewis Carroll and Sir Owen Seaman. Bret Harte showed the same quality; compare—

*Then Brown he read a paper, and he reconstructed there,  
From those same bones, an animal that was extremely rare.*

Another general consideration of very high importance in expressing humor is the use of comparisons by similes, metaphors and by subtle implications. Comparison is the very soul of humor. It adjusts the focus of vision on a thing in the light needed. It is the discovery of resemblance and of the lack of it that builds up the contrasts, discrepancies and incongruities on which, as has been insisted throughout this treatise, humor depends. To make metaphors demands both originality and training. One is lost in admiration of such comparisons as, ‘A face like a ham,’ ‘eyes like puddles of molasses,’ ‘legs like twenty-five minutes past six,’ and the sentence, “His hair all hung over his face in tangled strings like he was behind vines.” Metaphors are the very life of humor: very often the effect can be got merely by extending the use of a word to a new case or cases, where it fits in with surprising aptness. To ‘liquidate’ an account means to close it up and finish it; the new use ‘to liquidate’ a peasant would be humorous but for the horror of it. Indeed the principle involved is wider than the ground of humor. A vast quantity of our words are metaphors taken from words antecedent to them. We enrich our power of expression by perpetual and renewed comparisons, as a tree grows always in the bark and never at the heart.

No humorist who ever lived ever made greater and more continuous use of comparison than did Charles Dickens. It was a main characteristic of his mind to see likenesses in unlike things, to personify inanimate nature. His books are one vast comparison, flashing perpetually in humor. When he landed in Boston in 1842, his romantic imagination caught the bright red of the brick houses, the still brighter white

of the wooden, the gilded signs, the painted railings, all glittering in the morning sun—"all so light and unsubstantial in appearance that every thoroughfare in the city looked exactly like a scene in a pantomime." He kept glancing up at the boards, he tells us, expecting them to "change into something": he felt certain that "Clown and Pantaloon were hiding in a doorway or behind some pillar," and that "Harlequin and Columbine were lodged over a one-story clockmaker's shop."

Such comparisons were characteristic of Dickens and all his work. He was for ever comparing everything with everything else: and, above all, in this way endowing inanimate objects with life and movement: for him windows grin, doors yawn, clocks wink solemnly and trees talk in the night breeze. The fancies of Barnaby Rudge watching the clothes dance upon the clothes-line are those of his creator.

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We now pass to the more difficult and highly technical subject of jokes and how to narrate them. In our cautious survey of the field we have now reached the point where we may safely venture on such a discussion. To have done so prematurely would have turned this volume into a joke book and broken down the student's intelligence, just as the premature presentation of logarithms breaks down algebra to rule of thumb.

A joke may be defined as an item of humor reduced to a single point or particle. It represents the breaking up of humorous matter into its elements, so that we can examine and appreciate one little bit of it without any extraneous context. One might say that a joke is a self-contained humorous thought. Its essence is its isolation.

At first the number of jokes and kinds of jokes seems legion. One might despair of ever reducing them to scientific analysis or finding in them any laws of thought or principles of humor. Here for example is that excellent compendium, Mr. Lewis Copeland's *World's Best Jokes*, 1936. It contains almost 400 pages of matter, the jokes being divided into twenty-eight classes. There are jokes classified by nationality—American, Negro, Irish, Scotch, etc.; by professions—preachers, lawyers, doctors, hobos, etc.; verse, toasts, and even the epitaph that carries a joke beyond the grave. There is an interesting cross-division in an index dividing the jokes according to the basis on which they rest, such as ambiguity, double meanings, slips of the press, etc. In such a vast labyrinth it seems at first hard to find a thread of philosophical guidance. But at the same time if we examine jokes, one by one, we can discover that they form no exception to the canons of humor laid down: they bring together a set of facts, phenomena, or fancies, actualities or accidents, that set up an incongruity.

A typical joke proceeds from a hypothesis—let it be granted than so and so:

then in such and such circumstances an absurd result follows. To take more specific instances, let it be granted that professors are absent-minded; let it be granted that Scotchmen are avaricious; let it be granted that bashful men are afraid of women—then observe what happens to them. In other words a joke is a sort of syllogism with a major proposition as its hypothesis. The rest of it, in one fashion or other, can be reduced to a set of consequences running to an absurdity.

All of this in abstract language is not very comprehensible. So it may be better put into the concrete with a set of illustrations. Here for consideration is a list of jokes some of them already cited for other purposes in this book and others chosen as well-known standard examples.

#### JOKE NO. 1

*An Oxford undergraduate, showing some friends round the colleges, said, "Now this is Oriel College, and those windows up there are the Provost's study." Then taking up a handful of gravel from the walk he threw it up at a window, and added, "And that's the Provost coming to his window."*

Put into a syllogism this reads:

Let it be granted that gravel brings people to windows.

A Provost came to his window.

Therefore gravel brought the Provost.

In other words we have the incongruity that such a low thing as a handful of gravel commands such a high thing as a Provost.

#### JOKE NO. 2

*An absent-minded professor came home late one night and knocked at his door for admission. A servant put her head out of an upper window and called, "The professor has not yet come home." "Very good," he answered, "I'll come back later."*

The syllogistic analysis of this joke runs as follows:

People who knock at doors go away if someone is out.

The professor went away because someone was out.

But he was out himself—which is absurd.

In other words we have produced an utter incongruity by taking the hypothesis that professors are absent-minded and following it to its logical consequences.

It is sometimes difficult to say what should be the hypothesis or major premises of the syllogism. As an illustration:—

*A Scotchman visiting London on government business was asked on his return how he liked English officials. "I saw nothing of them," he said, "I was dealing only wi' heads of departments."*

Perhaps it runs:

English officials are English.  
 Heads of Departments are English officials.  
 Heads of Departments are Scotchmen.  
 Thus all Englishmen are Scotchmen. Which is absurd.

Other jokes and their syllogisms turn on similarities—let it be granted that two things are more or less the same thing and then see what absurdity happens.

We recall from the pages above the two deaf men in the train:—one looking for his station asks the other—

*"Is this Wemsley?"*

And gets the answer, *"No, Thursday."*

Let it be granted that Wemsley and Wednesday are much the same thing: then the difference between them (A-B) ought to be practically nothing. But it isn't: it's Thursday!

Which is absurd. The similarity of the two names opens up the incongruity of an absolute change of topic.

Nearly all verbal jokes follow the above pattern of the deaf men and turn on the wrong use of a word: something happens—either the 'frustrated expectation' when it means too little, or the exultation over incongruity when it means too much. Most 'child' jokes are of this sort, arising out of beginner's mistakes in learning language:

*"Auntie, can you change me half a crown?"*

*"Yes, darling, what do you want it changed into?"*

*"Into a sovereign, please."*

The joke is on the word *change* which is made to mean more than what it should, or rather is made to live up to what it should mean. Few people would realize that, in form, many of the propositions of geometry as written by Euclid are jokes. Till a few years ago all schools in England and America used the formal text of

Euclid, and even though the text is now revised and replaced, the form is still familiar to most people as Euclid's method. Condensed, it runs, as in such an example as this. *If two triangles have two angles of each equal to two angles of the other, each to each, then must the third angles be equal each to each. For if not, let one be greater than the other. Then the three angles of one are greater than of the other. But the three angles of each are equal to two right angles. Therefore two right angles are greater than two right angles—which is absurd!* At which point Euclid and his friends are supposed to go into roars of laughter.

But apart from this philosophical analysis of a joke into a *reductio ad absurdum*, there is much more to examine in the technique and construction of jokes. There is a broad distinction to be made between jokes that proceed by telling the truth and thus landing us in a sort of impossibility, and jokes that proceed to state an impossibility and land us in a truth. These contrasted types correspond very much to the *formal* aspect (not the inner) of typical British and typical American jokes. Here is a true British joke: A professor in a Scottish university (many of us could supply the name of the professor, as the story is true) paused in his lecture to say to a student, "Why do you not take any notes?" The young man answered, "I have my father's." But this is American: "Why is this whole street blocked like this, constable?" "The chess club are moving, sir."

Compare the two cases. The boy *did* have the lecture notes, but it seems impossible. It is impossible that the street was blocked, but a chess club *does* take a long time to move.

Let us illustrate this difference by a more extended citation of what may be called a typical English joke and one of a typical American. For the English joke we must go to *Punch*, a journal that many of us think unequalled in humor in all the world and certainly the most representative of English humor. In its early life, nearly a hundred years ago, *Punch* was somewhat different: it had more of the impatient temperament of youth, was more inclined to improve England by swearing at it than by smiling at it: but with years has come that mellow wisdom which realizes that humor and anger cannot go together, that even 'righteous indignation' belongs elsewhere. At what he cannot remedy the Mr. Punch of to-day may shake his head in sadness, but from his pen flows nothing but the ink of human kindness. It is this genial and mellow quality which lends the chief charm to his pages.

Now the typical *Punch* joke, illustrated or written, must be something that really happened, related as it happened, or, what is the same thing, something which is made up but which could have happened just as stated: indeed the point lies in the very likeliness of its happening. Here we have a picture of a Harley Street physician,

everything exactly drawn to life, the consulting-room, the wide table at which he sits, his dignified dress, the very action of his hands in pressing his fingertips on the table—a gesture without which no Harley Street physician could collect a fee. Even the uncomfortable patient, half-squirming in his chair on the opposite side of the table as he awaits his sentence, is drawn precisely to the life.

“Now, Mr. Pettigrew,” the doctor is saying, “we have to remember that our heart is in very poor condition, that we have had a shock, a severe shock, and that another such shock might kill us.”

This is beautiful. The doctor’s professional use of ‘we’ instead of ‘I,’ is a usage that must have grown up as an expression of sympathy, misery liking company. But when it is carried to the point of sharing Mr. Pettigrew’s death, it becomes incongruously contrary to the fact. The syllogism and the *reductio ad absurdum* set up by this joke is as follows:

Let it be granted that the Doctor and Mr. Pettigrew are one person.

Mr. Pettigrew is likely to die.

Therefore the Doctor is likely to die.

Which is absurd.

Now place beside this a typical American joke. Here we find that a queer twist of phrase, an impossible use of language, suddenly turns out to have meaning, and lots of it. An orator in voicing the thanks of a meeting to a political leader said: “I hope that this distinguished gentleman may long be spared to continue his political career, and that even when he’s dead *he’ll turn into a cigar.*”

Perhaps a word of explanation is needed for British readers. It has long been the custom in the United States for the makers of tobacco to name cigars after bygone statesmen—the Henry Clay cigar, the Stonewall Jackson cigar. Hence ‘turning into a cigar’ becomes synonymous with obtaining immortality.

Put as a syllogism it reads:

All great statesmen are cigars.

This man is a great statesman.

Therefore he must be a cigar too.

Which is absurd.

The attempt to analyse jokes is at least useful in helping us to know how to tell a joke and how to relate a funny story. To make up a joke is another matter, a rare and peculiar gift. In the technical sense the commercial *jokes* or *gags* are made up, or rather remade, from the Ancient Greek or Egyptian, by professional specialists. Occasionally an outsider stumbles on a joke and is able to reduce it to form. But the knack is a special one involving a quick sense of finding a new picture for an old

frame. So far as I know, none of the greater humorists of the last fifty years wrote jokes. When we talk of a joke of Dickens's or of Mark Twain's we imply a context. Mark Twain's joke, quoted elsewhere in this book, about the old man "who had never touched liquor in his life unless you count whisky," is part of a little essay on a grand old man.

It may sound a little malicious to say that our jokes of the present hour are remade from the ancient models. But no harm is meant. We could hardly expect them to be 'original.' Somebody said in despair about two hundred years ago, "tout est dit." Even the most brilliant and lively joke has its ancestor. Turn to the Greek witticisms of Hierocles and we read:

*A simpleton who heard that parrots live for two hundred years brought one to see if it was true.* This becomes a *type* thought—the fact that presently a person will be dead and hence won't be on the spot to see, or enjoy the thing in question. "When the day comes," says Ko-Ko, the Lord High-Executioner of *The Mikado*, in trying to persuade Nanki-poo to act as substitute at a public execution, "there'll be a grand ceremonial—you'll be the central figure—and when it's all over, general rejoicings and a display of fireworks in the evening. You won't see them, but they'll be there all the same."

The originality of joke-making consists in being able to maintain one's mind as a sort of mould in which the type-ideas and root-forms stamp and restamp themselves in shifting outline.

But joke-analysis can help us to retell the jokes we hear, no easy thing to do properly. Some jokes are 'fool-proof,' and can hardly be spoiled by bad narration, but such are rare. Few amateur narrators learn the value of brevity—the thing which leaps to the eye on analysis. People tell jokes with an introduction as to how they heard it (a matter of no consequence), or with unnecessary material of time and place (things immaterial to the point), and when they've told it, they retell it as corroboration. The real psychological trouble is that if told straight out the joke would sound too short and sudden. It would sound like "When we lived at Henley, Barnes's gander was stolen by tinkers." Yet the short and sudden effect is just what the stage comedian wants.

When we pass from the mere repetition of a joke as a friendly transaction, like passing the bottle to a friend, to the deliberate narration of a funny story of some length, we move on to different ground. To tell stories is to undertake a serious social responsibility: many a dinner-party is spoiled and many an evening is disturbed by the story-teller. His challenge arouses others. Dinner becomes a succession of rival efforts punctuated with what Sydney Smith called "brilliant flashes of silence," in

which Bill Nye professed to hear nothing but “the dull rumble of a thinker.” The original charm of whist and bridge was that people didn’t talk. After the babble of a comic man, silence is as sweet as a green wood. Most people should realize once and for all that story-telling is not for them. Let them talk about Mussolini, and whether communism is coming and whether Lulu Goo-Goo is truly great in her last picture or only half-sized. You can have a wonderful dinner talking on these topics with the right person: and let older people talk about the Home Rule Election of 1892 and whether Parliament has degenerated. But don’t tell stories. And for those who can tell them, be reasonable: a dinner-party is not a show, and above all don’t tell them twice to the same people. In fact better keep quiet.

But if, in spite of this wise caution (which recalls *Punch’s* advice to those about to marry), you still insist on telling funny stories, then perhaps a word of advice, even instruction, is not out of place.

In starting to tell a story never ask a listener if he has heard it before. That’s his business, not yours. He’s got to suffer anyway, if he’s a gentleman: and if he’s not, he will stop you.

In telling a funny story you must distinguish between telling it from a platform or stage to an audience, and telling it in ordinary society. On the stage you can be as unnatural and as unlike yourself as you like: you can assume an entirely artificial manner. It doesn’t matter. The people don’t know you. What you are seeking for is artistic effect. But in ordinary society you must tell a story as yourself. The art consists in appearing entirely yourself, entirely at your ease. Otherwise you make your hearers uncomfortable. You may be—or ought to be—deeply concentrated on what you are telling: but it must be deeply, not painfully.

Always be certain that you really remember the story you are going to tell and have got it right and don’t have to stop in the middle and make corrections. Thus, if you have said that the thing happened in Aberdeen, keep it there and don’t move it to Perth: if you say that you read it in an American paper, don’t check yourself to remark that it may have been a French paper. Perhaps it was in a Dutch paper—who cares?

Here is another small piece of advice, or entreaty, which I am sure will appeal to many people, though it is only a point of grammar. Do not use the word *this* unless it has something in front of it to refer to. *This* is properly supposed to refer to some antecedent noun. Yet many people begin a story, “This Scotchman came to London . . .” Query: What Scotchman? Worse still when the story-teller makes it two of them: “This Scotchman met this Englishman . . .” I do not think that any amount of usage can ever make this seem right, as the logic of words is against it. ‘This’ would

have to drift off into the meaning of ‘a certain’ (the Greek ΤΙΣ) before the usage could be consolidated.

A whole volume could be written on telling stories, on after-dinner speaking, and on the professional task of being a humorous entertainer. At the present time people no longer demand, or tolerate, the ‘comic lectures’ of two generations ago. Josh Billings (Henry Wheeler Shaw, 1818-85) toured northern Missouri in 1878 giving a lecture entitled “Wit, Philosophy and Wisdom.” ‘Giving it’ meant reading it, the lecturers of those days using a manuscript and sparing the audience not a word of it. This lecture had thirteen parts all disconnected: 1. Remarks on lecturing; 2. The Best Thing in Milk; 3. The Summer Resort; 4. Josh on Marriage—and we may say with the Bellman of *Hunting the Snark*, ‘Skip the rest.’ “It was an hour of short paragraphs,” says Mr. Cyril Clemens in his book *Josh Billings* (1932), a valuable ‘period’ book for students, “of short paragraphs, every one worth its weight in gold. The humorist-philosopher always wore long hair and sat down when he lectured.” Picture the scene, in a little Missouri ‘hall’ or ‘schoolroom’ in winter, overheated by a hemlock-stove, and you’d think the lecturer would fall asleep behind his hair.

At any rate, those who wish to qualify must realize that this would not do to-day. The unbroken ‘comic lecture’ has been put out of business by the brilliant work of stage entertainers. A humorous lecturer must at least seem to be lecturing about something: the humor becomes the method, not the matter. Artemus Ward had a prescience of this when he labelled his public lecture *Africa* and never mentioned the place. What is needed nowadays is a lecture on the *Gold Standard*, ‘punctuated with roars of laughter,’ or on the *Religions of the Orient* ‘relieved by the speaker’s delightful sense of fun.’ Those who can’t give such lectures had better keep off the platform.

It would be only too easy for anyone who has lectured for twenty years with the understanding, by contract, that the lectures were humorous, to hand out all sorts of didactic instructions on how to lecture. But I refrain. To teach public speaking out of a book reminds me of Mr. Ellis Parker Butler’s ‘correspondence-school’ detective; or of a little Scottish boy once in my employ who ‘had learned the motions of swimming’ in a Glasgow day school. He fell off my motor boat, and when we fished him up he said he ‘found the motions hard to put into practice.’ So they are with public speaking. Hence I will confine myself to one canon of advice. Begin your lecture with the words ‘Ladies and Gentlemen.’ Don’t begin—‘Ladies and *Gentlemen* when I knew I was to speak,’ etc. In other words, say everything as if it was the last thing you would ever say. But with that, don’t dawdle. The same is equally true of the attempt to put into words without pictures the humor of drawing

and its execution.

All that has been said about the technique and craft of humor could be said in a paraded form of the expression of humor in drawing. In particular it would be interesting to study the method and effect of caricature drawing, the line drawing in which humor best expresses itself. One would find here the same canons of contrast and incongruity as with the written word. One would find also the same differences of technique as between English and American work. English caricature line drawing runs to literalism, it is marvellous in its truth. Here again, as in writing, *Punch* has set a pattern for the world, and such work as that of Mr. Bernard Partridge is part of our legacy to the future. But American drawing runs to exaggerations, to glorious symbolism, to magic discoveries such as that the portrait of President Roosevelt the First could be reduced to a set of teeth, that a man can be drawn a hundred times in a hundred attitudes but without a chin: or take the marvellous methods of Mr. George McManus, creator of Mr. Jiggs, in conveying motion—the sense of being up at a great height, seasickness in two strokes of a sloping deck, or French ducal aristocracy done with a beard like a beaver's tail, fit to flatten a mud dam. Both arts are wonderful. But such discussion lies outside the scope of this volume. It could only be profitably undertaken with a pencil and paper, with illustration, and with a complete change of writer. But students of humor may revel in Mr. H. R. Westwood's collection of *Modern Caricaturists* (1932): see also *Caricature of To-day* (1928), edited by Geoffrey Holme: and students of art may derive great profit from the studies offered as prefaces of these works by Mr. David Low and Mr. Randall Davies.

But the above distinction as between British and American humorous drawings must not be pushed too far. It is a tendency rather than an absolute line of direction. After all, if an American cartoonist can draw a man without a chin, the caricaturist Mr. Aubrey Hammond can dispense entirely with the nose: and if Theodore Roosevelt could be reduced to a box of teeth, at least one English statesman of our day has been reduced to an eye-glass. Indeed, if one turns back to the grotesques of a century and a half ago with which modern British caricature begins, one finds that exaggeration and distortion of outline was the very essence of them—long noses, protruding bellies, spindle-shanks and bulging eyes. These were rather the products of malice than of true humor. But it may be said that if one regards not the caricature portraits done by the great masters of the art, but the thousand and one 'comic' drawings which appear in the current press, the distinction becomes more marked. American 'funny pictures' do attempt to appeal by exaggeration of outline and by the substitution of the single detail for the ensemble, while British illustrations aim rather

at a drawing beautifully true and yet beautifully funny.

*Chapter IX*  
*HUMOR AND SUBLIMITY*

Humor in its highest reach touches the sublime: humor in its highest reach mingles with pathos: it voices sorrow for our human lot and reconciliation with it. Life, for many people, is not satisfactorily explained: but at least as it passes into retrospect it matters less. "We are such stuff as dreams are made of and our little life is rounded with a sleep,"—so said Shakespeare: and again, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more."

That is exactly the point of view: not that these lines are humor, for there is no humor in that, but they convey the point of view from which the greatest humor seems to start. It is born, as it were, in perplexity, in contemplation of the insoluble riddle of existence. If it here gave up the task it would turn to indifference, to cruelty or at best to an Epicurean philosophy of eating, drinking and being merry, 'for tomorrow we must die.' Incidentally this is not what Epicurus meant, but we use the word in that sense. But humor is saved from that by having made first acquaintance and then union with pathos, meaning here, pity for human suffering. United, each tempers and supports the other: pathos keeps humor from breaking into guffaws and humor keeps pathos from subsiding into sobs. It is like the union of two metals, one too hard, the other too soft for use alone. *Sunt lachrymae rerum*; the world is full of weeping. But it would be a terrible place if there were nothing else. Nor can laughter stay alone except for the loon and the jackass.

We have seen in this book how humor has gradually moved upwards from rude beginnings to higher and kindly forms. The underlying thesis is that humanity has as a whole grown better, and its literature has grown also from simpler forms to higher meaning and complexity. The first of these propositions would meet with fairly general, though not universal assent. Most of us feel that the world has progressed in the moral sense since ancient days: slowly if you like, but yet moving forward. We are less cruel than earlier peoples, except in moments of fury: we have not their indifference. Gladiators are replaced by county cricket; a torture chamber by a police station; and a Chinese execution by a stipendiary magistrate. It is true that we read of single and idyllic tribes of the remote past, or of remote geography, unsullied by human crime, unspoiled by human vice. They are like Mr. Irvin Cobb's Bolshevik, who is a man who will give you everything he's got and he hasn't got anything. These idyllic views of savage life seem to dissolve on closer sight: behind the bright greens of the foreground are the dark shadows of cannibalism and infanticide and the fungus of filth. Among these idylls was once the North American

Indian, otherwise ‘Lo,’ whose untutored mind saw God in clouds and heard him in the wind. Eighteenth-century literature depicted him as ‘the noble savage,’ tall feathers on his head, a blanket draped about him, and an air of independence that didn’t even need a declaration. I can speak for ‘Lo.’ Proper study and investigation has put him where he belongs. There is no moral grandeur about him. Hard by the place where I write this book is a ‘Shrine’ erected over the scene of one of his hideous burnings. Without going the length of Mark Twain and lumping the whole period from the Garden of Eden to George Washington into one solid condemnation as the ‘Middle Ages,’ I think most of us will agree that the present is ‘better’ than the past: more humane even if less certain of a better world to come.

But the other proposition above, that literature has come up and up, that the literature of the present (meaning, say, the last two or three hundred years) is superior to that of the past, would be warmly denied by many people. What is more, the people who would chiefly deny it would be among those who have devoted most study to words and books, indeed know little or nothing else. Classical scholars claim that once and for all the Greek drama reached a form that we are not likely to rival or to emulate. The mould is broken. The drama of Æschylus with just two people on the stage, or call it on the platform, at the same time, seems to me about as exciting as the ‘dialogues’ that we used to have at ‘entertainments’ in the little red school-house sixty years ago. But that is only a personal opinion. Nor can I find in the ancient world anything to correspond with the vast domain of modern imaginative fiction, a garden of enchantment. It would be possible, I suppose, to sit and read Homer over and over as cottagers read their Bible, and socialists read Karl Marx. But in fairness I have to admit that those who uphold ancient literature against modern, may mean that Greek drama, Greek philosophy and Greek history are written with purer form, deeper thought and a more powerful idiom than that of today.

Even the *idiom* I would deny. The eighteenth-century idea that modern languages are broken-down forms of ancient languages and hence inferior as any broken-down thing is to the thing of which it is the fragments, is as silly as it is illogical. Our modern languages, broken from forms with affixes and suffixes into single words, have an indescribably greater flexibility. One need not go to Greek to see that: one has only to compare with English the language of the Ojibway Indians. The point is perhaps beside the scope of this book. Yet if I wanted to write a joke I think I could write it better in English than in Greek.

But what I strenuously assert on ground that I feel to be solid is that the world’s humor in literature has notably gone forward. Again one is confronted with ‘Attic

wit' and the 'sallies' of Aristophanes: nor can there be any settlement. I can again only express my opinion as personal, not as didactic: as telling students what I think and not as claiming that it is what is thought by everybody. To me there is hardly any humor in Greek and Latin literature. But the discussion in the first chapter has already covered the question, or indicated its existence. What I am talking about in this chapter is the growth of that element in humor which lifts it into sublimity. I think that that has come as a consequence of our advance in humanity, and that it could not have come without it.

Let me indicate at closer range the point of view before discussing its embodiment in the works of authors. Life is full of anxiety, of fret, of pain. At the end of it is death, and when we look upon a dead face somehow the pain has gone from it—there is 'all eternity to rest in.' So, when we see them in retrospect, what were the troubles of to-day become the trifles of yesterday; as things drift into the past, animosity and anger fade out of them; the hate is gone, the bitterness is washed out. More than that: it seems a psychological law that when pain steps out of the window joy comes in at the door. We look back in retrospect and the anger turns to laughter, the bitterness to fun. Listen to any two people, meeting again in old age after knowing one another as children, laughing over the recollection of quarrels, blows, tears that at the moment were bitter tragedy. So with the past, for all of us. Round it grows the legend of a golden age, the idea of the good old times, the winters that were, the Christmases that used to be.

The past loses its pain. We can sing of 'battles long ago,' with a weird sense of charm as of a thing of beauty, not of horror. "It was a summer's evening, old Kaspar's work was done"—observe *that*, "a summer's evening." Kaspar and the children digging up the skulls of the Blenheim soldiers at midnight in a thunderstorm would be something else. The picture must fit to a summer's evening.

It is out of these subtle elements, delicate as gossamer, that the humor of sublimity is made. It views life, even life now, in as soft a light as we view the past. Observe the distinctions to be made. Often we can understand what a thing is by being told what it is not. So in the present instance consider the humor of Dickens in *Oliver Twist*, and the suffering of the little victims of the workhouse, or in *Nicholas Nickleby* and the brutal establishment of Squeers. This is not the humor of which we speak because there is angry protest in it: humor here blends with passion, not with pathos. Now look at this example, beautiful as a cut cameo. It is from an American illustrated paper of years ago. Here is a picture of two little ragged starvelings in a garret, thin little boys, so thin the pencil's outline can hardly draw them. To the one lying sick in a truckle bed the other is reading a newspaper. He is evidently reading

out an account of the ‘luxury dogs’ of the New York dog show just happening. “Fido, after he has his evening lamb chop, is always wrapped in a warm ermine coat with a blue and silver belt around it.” “Some dogs,” says the other little boy, “is luckier than—others.” No diatribe against poverty: just the little sickly faces, and the changed end of the child’s sentence as he instinctively altered it.

Now this is the humor in the broad and beautiful sense that is found in the book *Huckleberry Finn* and that confers on it immortality. It may seem a strange thing, but I think it is more found in the pages of American humor than in British. I do not mean that it is not found in British: one has only to think of Sir James Barrie’s *Sentimental Tommy*, or of that beautiful masterpiece of yesterday, *Good-bye, Mr. Chips*.

But I think it is found in America more: and it is possible, and even profitable to discuss why this is so, although here we are stepping out on to the open heath of conjecture without even a footpath in sight.

A great many of us in North America (the United States and Canada, which last the word America seems to omit) will admit that on the whole our literature—history, belles lettres, poetry and fiction all included—has not equalled in volume or value that of the older English-speaking world. Some of the world’s greatest books have been written in America: but the honor roll of Britain is longer.

But many of us think that humor is an exception to this, and that here the American product reckoned in value, volume, number of laughs per page, or plumbed for depth, is equal to anything in the world. Indeed, American humor, when it first rose in its distinctive form, made such a sudden conquest of England that no one has since doubted its merit. The humor that we call American is based on seeing things as they are, as apart from history, convention and prestige, and thus introducing sudden and startling contrasts as between things as they are supposed to be—revered institutions, accepted traditions, established conventions—and things as they are. Like many other things this humor came out of the West, beyond the plains. You had to get clear away from civilization to start it.

Till the middle nineteenth century, humor in America was represented either in the polite culture of Washington Irving or Hawthorne, a part of the British heritage, or as an indigenous product of wild exaggeration, tall stories and crude spelling. But a new era opened for American humor when such men as young Sam Clemens and Artemus Ward and Bret Harte went West and took a look back at America from the top of the Rocky Mountains: not only America, they could look clear across to Europe and see it as no one had ever seen it before. They enjoyed what painters call the ‘eye of innocence’ which most of us lose in infancy. This ability to see things as

they are become the basis of new American humor. It is embodied in Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* more than in any other book. But it lies at the basis of the work of all the 'school,' if one can give such a name to people who hardly went there. When Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee* speaks of the armor of a knight as 'hardware,' he is seeing it as no one could see it who was used to calling it bassinet, gorget, greaves and hawberk.

Such humor, of course, can easily degenerate into mere cheap irreverence, making fun of things merely because they are exalted while in reality there is nothing to make fun of. It can also take the perverted form of scoffing at things merely because they are different from things at home. An American who comes over to Europe and laughs at it isn't necessarily a humorist. Moreover American humor carries with it, by custom and convention, though not in all cases, a peculiar technique of words as already discussed. This too can be strained and overdone, and false effects substituted for true ones. Hence there are found people, otherwise intelligent, who 'don't care' for American humor. But as a rule this means that they don't care for humor in general, or have been unlucky in their American samples.

Now what I am saying here is that in my opinion when we come to that high form of humor in which the pathos of life in general is the basis—the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness—American humor reaches to it more easily and more often than British. The point is one which can only be a matter of taste and judgment. There is no rule, no objective criterion.

Let me cite here the work of the late Ring K. Lardner, an American journalist and story-writer who died, all too soon, in 1933. Some of his best stories are published in a volume called *Round Up*. Among them is a beautiful thing called *Then and Now*. It is a story written as two sets of letters, sent home from a holiday resort in the West Indies. The first are written to a girl friend by a young bride, in the first flush of matrimonial bliss, and matrimonial conceit in her husband's slavery. The style is set almost to the point of vulgarity and the egotism almost to the point of being tiresome: "*Of course, he this . . . and of course, he that . . . and of course, he won't hear of playing golf without me,*" etc.

The next set of letters are from the same woman to the same correspondent from the same place a few years later (not too many). The point lies in the change—no tragedy, nothing violent has happened: just that now the 'of course' is the other way. No blame to anyone: just life. The pathos of it is as soft as a sigh.

The writings of O. Henry again and again exhibit this peculiar quality. Let anyone read the matchless story called *The Pendulum*. Here are a young husband and wife, 'flat dwellers' of New York with their drab house, its limited outlook, the husband at

work all day and back at supper-time, the wife always cooking and washing up; and every night at about a quarter past eight the husband would “summon his nerve and reach for his hat, and his wife would deliver this speech in a querulous tone:

*‘Now, where are you going, I’d like to know, John Perkins?’*

*‘Thought I’d drop up to McCloskey’s,’ he would answer, ‘and play a game of pool or two with the fellows.’”*

Then one night when John comes home Katy is not there—called away by a telegram from a sick mother. She has left cold supper for him. She will write tomorrow. All of a sudden he sinks into consternation. It is their first time apart in their two years of marriage. A great loneliness comes over him. How can he ever have left her alone in the evenings! When she comes back it shall all be different. And at that moment Katy, who has been called away on a false alarm, comes in at the door.

*‘Nobody heard the click and the rattle of the cogwheels as the third-floor front of the Frogmore flats buzzed its machinery back into the Order of Things. A band slipped, a spring was touched, the gear was adjusted and the wheels revolved in their old orbits.*

*John Perkins looked at the clock. It was 8.15. He reached for his hat and walked to the door.*

*‘Now, where are you going, I’d like to know, John Perkins?’ asked Katy, in a querulous tone. ‘Thought I’d drop up to McCloskey’s,’ said John, ‘and play a game or two of pool with the fellows.’”*

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But many people will agree that the book which develops this high type of humor more than any other is Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. It was first published in 1884: it has ever since been one of the world’s books. Mark Twain’s wife and the admiring New England circle who undertook to make a gentleman of him, did their affectionate best to spoil his work by trying to make it ‘respectable.’ They wanted it to be on the level of a ‘Friendship’s Garland’ or a ‘Youth’s Guide.’ As a result of this ‘ordeal’ as Mr. Van Wyck Brooks has called it (*The Ordeal of Mark Twain*, 1920), Mark Twain never knew ‘where he was at’ and could not value or estimate properly his own literary ideas and literary ‘urges.’ For all he knew, they might turn out to be improper. So he wrote masses of stuff in wrong directions: because they told him that he mustn’t be irreligious, he was attracted by the idea of writing up hell and heaven, and wrote them up in secreted manuscripts. He was quite unaware that the heaven and hell of his manuscripts belonged to Missouri *anno domini* 1835 and hadn’t been seen since. On the other hand, Joan of Arc being a virgin and a martyr and therefore respectable, he was encouraged to write a whole book about her. The

book is as close to drivel as anything could be when written with such prestige.

But Mark Twain also kept dreaming of writing an account of an outcast boy, so humble that his opinions couldn't matter: and this boy was to go floating down the Mississippi on a raft, with a Negro for his companion: and that would let the writer bring in all the glory and wonder of the river—the moving mist rising from the water, the woods on the farther shore often a mile away, the islands here and there, the swirling currents, and, when night fell on the waters, the sound of voices heard half a mile off, and the lights of a great river steamer, bright as a hotel, with a trail of sparks from its tall funnels into the dark. The river was in Mark Twain's mind as its furthest memory, as its abiding picture: he could realize the majesty and mystery of it. Contrast him with Charles Dickens, who came to America when Mark Twain was six years old and went as far west as the Mississippi and forthwith turned into a peevish Cockney, seeing nothing in the great rivers and forests of this continent but swamps, bull-frogs, marshes and malaria.

But Mark Twain's vision was born in him. The plan of his book had arisen partly from a previous volume called *Tom Sawyer*, an exuberant book, merry with laughter and with high spots of tragedy, that leaped into universal popularity but left the deeper notes unsounded. Unconsciously Mark Twain wanted something of greater meaning, in which, through the eyes of the outcast Huckleberry Finn and the runaway Nigger Jim, the world could be seen and known.

But the whole subject had a touch of disreputability—a ragged boy on a raft, a nigger and no other background than just the 'river' anyway that everybody knows! Let's write about Princes and Paupers or get started on Joan of Arc! So the manuscript was thrown around and laid aside and was years in the completion. But luckily when parts of it were read aloud in the family circle the children laughed over it in joy, and so Huck, dirty and ragged, got past the censorship. Here and there the text was mauled and disfigured, but mainly it 'got by.'

It is not possible to convey a full idea of the greatness of the book by random quotations. Like much of Mark Twain's work *Huckleberry Finn* contains rigid transitions from the sublime and the romantic to what runs close to being sheer burlesque. Huck and Jim float down the river in their raft, fugitives from law and civilization, anchored in hiding all day under vines and bushes, moving on at night. All this has a background as spacious, as primitive as when shepherds watched their flocks by night: this is a vision of romance, and with it is the interest of the unsullied mind of little Huck, his rags and his chewing tobacco in contrast to the purity of his soul: and Jim a slave—and in his every word and thought an unconscious condemnation of slavery. But when intruders come upon the raft, the two 'bums'

called the King and the Duke of Bilgewater, we pass to roaring burlesque, and presently, in the shore episodes, to swift and sudden tragedies. But the basis of the book is the picture of Huck and Jim on the river, and the atmosphere that seems to breathe from its pages the mingled tears and laughter, the smile that is a sigh, which mark the highest form of humor. Seen in this light humor is not the lower level of the field of literature, but lies around the summits of its highest range.

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## *TRANSCRIBER NOTES*

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Humor and Humanity: An Introduction to the Study of Humor* by Stephen Leacock]