

Democracy of the Joke

And Lack of German Humor

Discussed by Leacock

Famous Canadian Wit Also Gives His Views on the Perversity of the Russian Verb



Stephen Leacock

A COLLEGE professor is absent-minded. A college professor is impractical. A college professor lacks a sense of humor. Consider, for instance, Professor Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll. Consider, for instance, Professor Stephen Leacock, head of the Department of Economics and Political Science at McGill University.

Now, the author of "Moonbeams from the Larger Lunacy" and "Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich" and "Further Foolishness," looks no more like a college professor than he looks like a Druid—whatever a Druid may have looked like. He is a bronzed, thick-set man, with reddish hair and a rather Rooseveltian mustache. He has none of the professorial gestures. He does not, while speaking, twirl his eyeglasses on a broad, black ribbon. He has no eyeglasses to twirl. He does not emphasize a remark by means of a lifted forefinger. His chief oratorical gesture is to put his hands into his trousers pockets.

And yet the Mr. Hyde aspect of this extraordinary Canadian case of dual personality is not more conspicuous than the Dr. Jekyll aspect—if it is permitted to discriminate in this wholly insincere manner between the humorist and the professor. Mr. Leacock refuses to conform, in appearance or in speech, to the traditions of the profession of humorist. He never speaks in a "characteristic drawl." He does not wear that expression of exaggerated solemnity which most humorists use to give the charm of contrast to their jokes. When Mr. Leacock speaks at a dinner or on a public platform he is as natural in manner as when he is talking to a friend. He says what he has to say, and when what he says seems to him to be funny he smiles (a smile so wide that it may deserve another name) or laughs—a laugh that is hearty and contagious.

Nothing annoys Mr. Leacock more than to suggest that his humorous writings are by-products, as it were; that he writes such things as "Nonsense Novels" when his wearied brain is unable to perform the serious labors of the economist. The writing of solid, instructive stuff fortified by facts and figures is easy enough, he says. There is no trouble in writing a scientific treatise on the folklore of Central China or a statistical inquiry into the declining population of Prince Edward Island. But to write something out of one's own mind, worth reading for its own sake—this, he holds, is an arduous contrivance only to be

achieved in fortunate moments, few and far between. And he declares that he would sooner have written "Alice in Wonderland" than the Encyclopædia Britannica.

When, on a recent visit to New York City, Mr. Leacock talked to a reporter for THE NEW YORK TIMES, his mind was full of the President's message and of the significance of America's entrance into the war. And what seemed to impress him most was the "beautiful calm" with which Americans had taken the news of this momentous event.

"I was at a club dinner in New York last night," he said, "and when the news came in the Chairman arose and said: 'Gentlemen, the President has asked Congress to declare war. I ask you to rise and drink the health of the President of the United States.' That was all; there was no outburst of emotionalism.

Mr. Leacock is not of Canadian birth. He was born at Swanmoor, Hampshire, England, in 1869. His parents went to Canada in 1876, and Mr. Leacock, to use his own words, "decided to go with them." He was brought up on a farm near Lake Simcoe, Ontario, and seems more like a Canadian than an Englishman. And one of his hobbies is that between the Canadian and the American there is very little difference beside that of politics.

"I think," he said, "that O. Henry was right. He said, you remember, that human nature was the same in Oshkosh, Wis., and New York City. And I don't think that human nature is changed by the boundary line between Canada and the United States.

"I have been hauled over the coals by the English reviewers," said Mr. Leacock, "for my amalgamation of Canada with the United States, for my use of the word America for Canada and the United States together, in defiance of the Constitution of the United States and other important documents. But I claim that we are one in everything except governmental allegiance. How is it possible to distinguish the Canadian Maritime Provinces from New England? How is it possible to distinguish the people of Saskatchewan from the people of the prairie States? There are people who for some reason want to emphasize the differences between Canadians and citizens of the United States. But as a matter of fact these differences are very hard to find.

"Of course, there are political differences. You invited us Canadians to join you—in 1777, I think it was. We didn't accept your invitation. And now it seems

to us that it would be silly for us to think of joining you. We play a more useful part by acting as a sort of hyphen between England and the United States. So the political difference must remain. But in social matters, indeed, in everything except politics, we are closer to the United States than we are to England. And of course now the fact that, thank God! you are coming into the war makes us all eager to emphasize the resemblances rather than the differences between Americans and Canadians.

"I suppose," said Mr. Leacock, "that I ought to be talking to you about literature, and that sort of thing. But there are certain things that I must say to you because I can't think of anything else just now. And one of the things I want to say is that one of the greatest events in history will take place when a Massachusetts regiment marches through the streets of London with the Union Jack and the Stars and Stripes flying together. The English people will go wild with enthusiasm. They were enthusiastic enough over the Canadian troops, but that's nothing to what they'll do when the Americans come!

"With England, France, and the United States together we needn't worry about the rest of the world. The future of democracy is assured. And this is especially true now that Russia is with us as a democracy. Of course, there may be counter-revolutions in Russia, instigated by those who desire to hinder Russia's participation in the war, but they cannot be successful. Russia must be a democracy now.

"The future of the world is with democracy. Autocracy has had its day. Before the war people used to admire the autocracy of the Germans; it was supposed to be part of the celebrated German efficiency. But it has been discovered that German efficiency is really inefficient, and now there is no one in his right mind who prefers autocracy to democracy.

"And now," said Mr. Leacock, "I'll try to talk about literature. For what I said really reminds me of something. Do you know what is the most democratic form of literature? It is humorous literature. For of humorous literature the only test is: Do they laugh or do they not laugh? No King ever posed as a humorist. No King ever was a humorist, that is, an intentional humorist.

"And one proof of the democracy of humor is its absence in Germany. Is there any one not a German to whom the German joke appeals? The German joke, like the peace of God, passeth all understanding.

"Real humor is universal in its appeal; its popularity extends beyond national boundaries. Mark Twain has been translated into every language, and he is as funny in French or modern Greek as he is in English. In exchange for Mark Twain we import Tartarin. Charles Dickens is the property of all the world; we think of him as a great humorist instead of as a man who wrote to amuse the English. But German humor does not cross the Rhine. The world knows German philosophy and German science and German scholarship, but it knows nothing of German humor. And the reason for this must be that there is no German humor to know."

Now Mr. Leacock walked up and down the room and spoke with considerable fervor.

"This whole business," he said, "of German philosophy and German scholarship is tremendously overrated! The Germans have been giving us an unintelligible mass of words, and we have felt obliged to think that this mass of words

contained profundities of thought. One good thing that war is doing for our colleges is to clear out German philosophy—to sweep away great masses of statistics and facts that we have imported from Germany, that have simply cluttered up our educational system. Our American economic schools have been suffused with German theories and German methods. Now we're getting rid of all this lumber.

"The only German humor, the existence of which I will admit," said Mr. Leacock, "is the old German folk-humor—'Strewelpeter,' and the like. But this folk-humor antedates modern Germany by centuries. It is a part of our old Teutonic heritage. And 'Strewelpeter' has no place in what today is considered humor in Germany."

"What about Jugend and Simplicissimus?" asked the reporter.

"Of course, they are good," said Mr. Leacock. "Let us be fair. But their humor was not genuinely German—that is, the humor in them that we all enjoy. They are imitations of the French humorous weeklies, and whatever was good in them was French.

"I think," he continued, "that we ought to substitute Russian literature and culture for that of Germany. I think that this must happen. We are all discovering Russia these days. I am studying Russian now at McGill University. McGill is the first university to give a course in the Russian language."

"But haven't we had rather too much of the Russian novel recently?" the reporter suggested.

"That's one unfortunate thing about the discovery of Russia," said Mr. Leacock. "We've been deluged with a lot of modern Russian trash that has harmed the reputation of the Russian novel with us. We've been given books by Artzibashev, and that sort of rubbish. It's as if some one were to translate the contents of Snoopy Stories and the Splashy Magazine into Russian and tell the Russians that this is representative American literature. We should read Dostoevsky and Turgenieff and the classics if we would know what Russian literature really is."

Mr. Leacock smiled reminiscently. He was thinking of the hours when, instead of a teacher of economics, he is a student of Russian.

"There are," he said, "thirty-five letters in the Russian alphabet. And fifteen of them seem to be useless. I don't see why the Russians should use cur letters for purposes entirely different from ours. I don't see, for example, why the Russians should use our *h* for their *н*, and I don't see why they should add 'hard' and 'soft' letters after words. They have no letter for *w* and none for *z*, and *l* in the middle of a word is silent. So the word 'William' would seem to make no sound at all in Russian!

"And the Russian verb is a fearful and wonderful thing. It has what no other respectable verb has—it has 'aspects.' In Russian there is a distinction made by the form of the verb between merely doing a thing and doing the same thing once and never again. I use different forms of the Russian verb for 'jump' according to whether I mean merely 'I jump' or 'I jump once and for all'—as, for instance, from the top of the Biltmore Hotel. This is called the 'semelactive aspect' of the Russian verb. So the Russian says 'I took a drink' in two different ways. If he says it in one way he means merely that he took a drink, without prejudice as to his future conduct. If he says it in another way he means that he took his last drink."