

Spent 22 Years Collecting 15,000 Similes

Frank J. Wilstach's Ardent and Relentless Hunt for This Elusive Figure of Speech Results in a Remarkable Collection

By Joyce Kilmer.

FRANK J. WILSTACH does not look exactly like "a writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge that busies himself in tracing the original and detailing the signification of words," which is Dr. Samuel Johnson's definition of a lexicographer. Yet a lexicographer he is, for he has recently finished the compilation of a dictionary of similes—the only work of the kind in existence. Throughout the last twenty-two years, in the midst of his exacting literary and theatrical duties, he has been collecting material for this book, and now it is about to appear.

Since the very beginning of English literature the simile has been a favorite figure of speech, yet Mr. Wilstach's book is the first compilation of the best similes from English, as well as from all other literatures, to be made. It is true that in bygone ages there were books that seem by their titles to be dictionaries of similes, but they are not true dictionaries: they are original works by writers who selected the simile as their favorite medium for expressing their thoughts. When I saw Mr. Wilstach a few days ago he told me of some of these early works.

"One collection of similes was made in the sixteenth century," he said, "and three were made during the seventeenth. These books are: 'Certaine Very Proper and Most Profitable Similes, also Manie Very Notable Vertues,' by Antoine Fletcher, London, 1595; 'A Treasure or Storehouse of Similes: Both Pleasant, Delightful and Profitable for All States of Men in Generall, Newly Collected Into Heades and Commonplaces,' by Robert Cawdray, London, 1606; 'A Collection of Similes,' by Thomas Shelton, London, 1620, and 'Things New and Old: or a Storehouse of Similes,' by John Spencer, 1623.

"Of these books," Mr. Wilstach continued, "three—Fletcher's, Cawdray's, and Spencer's—are in the Library of Congress. All four are in the British Museum. I have seen the three that are in the Library of Congress, and they are not the collectors of similes their titles suggest, but religious treatises. The phrase 'newly collected into heades' does not mean that Cawdray had collected the similes of the great English writers up to his time, but merely that they are his own original efforts. His quotations are taken almost entirely from the Scriptures. John Spencer knew nothing, it seems, of Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, or Butler; his book shows that he was acquainted only with the ecclesiastical writers of his time.

"John Ray published 'A Collection of English Proverbs' in 1670. Eight and a half pages are filled with 'proverbial similes,' some of a character too gross for modern taste, others of a distinctly local character. A part of the second volume of Lean's 'Collectanea,' published in five volumes at Bristol, England, in 1903, is given over to 'A New Treasury of Similes.' Lean made use of but three modern similes, one each from Dickens, Tennyson, and George Eliot."

Mr. Wilstach found more similes in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Spenser, Shelley, and Swinburne than in any other writers. And Swinburne, he told me, was more addicted to this form of expression than any other English writer, there being scarcely one of his pages lacking two or three similes. The poet who made the least frequent use of this figure was Walt Whitman.

"The making of this dictionary," said Mr. Wilstach, "has been a good deal in the nature of a romantic venture. And now that it is completed—that is, as nearly as ever such a book does come to completion—I feel like a person who has been awakened from a delightful dream in which he has met many wonderful people and enjoyed many rare experiences. One could hardly have visited and sucked the sweets, like a bee, from many thousands of volumes without encountering many strange and delectable thoughts and personages.

"During all the years that I have been at work on the dictionary, I never had any desire or hope that it would be printed. I made it simply for my own use and amusement. Three years ago I had the two thousand or more type-written pages bound into three large, bulky volumes with the idea of presenting them to the New York Public Library. The manuscript has gone through many adventures. It was once lost—in a removal—and it passed through two fires, unscathed. The work was done at odd moments on railroad trains, the New York elevated, on steamships, and

compared with the original. Later, returning from a visit to England, I examined the manuscript and found the bright little typist had improved the spelling of these worthies—that is, brought them all up to date! Meanwhile, a fire had destroyed a part of my library and these books among the others. So I had to get new sets of the books and do the work all over again. And then another fire, the second visitation, came along and destroyed the results of a month's work among old and curious volumes of Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Restoration literature in

Whitcomb Riley, in 1886. But when I wrote to the Hoosier poet and asked him if he were its father, he disclaimed ever having heard of the child. Years ago I noted that Opie Read had been given credit for 'Noisy as a living skeleton having a fit on a hardwood floor;' but Mr. Read, some years back, denied the authorship. On the other hand, Irvin S. Cobb informs me that he accepts all blame for having made merry with the privacy of the goldfish.

"Much of an interesting nature might be said on the subjects chosen for similes during different periods.

"It is interesting to see how a writer gives a simile his own cast of thought. Take Shakespeare; you would know instinctively that he wrote, 'Hooted at like an old tale.' Hawthorne, Poe, and Joseph Conrad have a surprising likeness to each other in all their similes, their minds each having a penchant for the gruesome and the awful. Hawthorne said, 'Indistinct as the premonition of calamity;' Poe, 'The eye, like a shattered mirror, multiplies the images of despair,' and Conrad, 'Unintentional as the birth of a thought.' One would naturally attribute any one of these similes to any one of these writers. Then take Hugo. How natural for him to have said, 'A compliment is like a kiss through a veil.' One would instantly know that Shelley wrote 'Blue as the overhanging heaven,' and Tennyson, 'Chimes like silver hammers falling on silver anvils.' Swinburne had a haunting love of the sea, and so we have, 'Aspire, as all the sea's life toward the sun.' Take three of our modern humorists, O. Henry, George Ade, and Irvin S. Cobb. We get from them exactly what we would expect, that is: O. Henry, 'Merry as an alimony bell'; Ade, 'Big as a church debt,' and Cobb, 'Sore as a mashed thumb.' The late Henry James was an apt maker of similes. I recall his characterization, 'A face that was like an open letter in a foreign tongue.'

Mr. Wilstach's account of the beginning of his great task is interesting. "One Spring day," he said, "I was in Boston, and as I looked over the morning papers I read that the news of a certain important happening at the State House 'spread like wildfire.' 'Like wildfire' was one of the similes used in every account of the affair.

"'Could news spread in any other way?' I asked my friend, John T. Burke, who at that time was city editor of The Boston Traveler. He replied that he had never heard of news spreading in any other way.

"From that day I began to copy into a large blankbook all the similes I found. Finding the collection of use to others as well as to myself, I determined that as opportunity presented I would begin with Chaucer and gather all the useful and picturesque similes from the important poets and prose writers down to the present time. It seemed an endless undertaking; but I pursued the work with growing interest and delight. As my occupation during the intervening years took me back and forth from New York to San Francisco, and hither and thither to all parts of the country, much of the work was done on railroad trains, and many an evening hour was spent in the libraries of Boston, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, New Orleans, St. Louis, and other cities.

"Victor Hugo, in 'Les Miserables,' tells of an old man who never went out without a book, and who seldom came back without two. This has a humorous application to myself. Year after year I have carried about with me some volume or other on which I had set my covetous eyes, hoping during an idle moment in a busy day to rifle it of its similes. And often, like the character in 'Les Miserables,' I have ventured forth with a single volume and returned with a precious arm load. So this work has been carried on through sheer love of the chase."



Frank J. Wilstach.

in public libraries, over the country. I have never been able, except on Sundays, to sit down like a leisurely old bookworm and dig for similes.

"My main object has been to gather the best similes from all the great names in literature. I attempted, for instance, to get everything to be found in such writers as John Lyly, Chaucer, Spenser, Robert Burton, Shakespeare, Shelley, Keats, Byron, the Brownings, Tennyson, and so on, down to the present time. I have hunted for odd and rare volumes, in libraries and bookstores, and have attempted to collect such colloquial similes, or proverbs, as are current in our speech.

"By the way, the baseball reporter, in recent times, has been a prolific manufacturer of the odd and curious in similes. I recall one from a baseball game reported in THE NEW YORK TIMES. The reporter wrote that the opposing nine, when some favorite pitcher was in the box, 'had about as much chance as a Prohibition candidate in a Democratic ward.' And once, when a certain aspiring pugilist challenged Mr. Johnson, R. L. Goldberg said 'he would have about as much chance as a Hamburg steak in front of a starving iron molder.'

"The manuscript," said Mr. Wilstach, "has had many adventures. Procuring the works of Lyly, Chaucer, and Spenser, I devoted myself for several weeks to rifling them of their similes. Then I handed them to a typist to be copied and

the British Museum. Five years later I did this work all over again."

I asked Mr. Wilstach to tell me some of the statistics of his extraordinary work.

"I have gathered something like 15,000 similes, under something like 3,000 subject headings, from more than 3,000 writers," he replied. "I much regret that I have not been able to quote as many more poets, essayists, novelists, and historians. I have found, by the way, that the late Russian dramatists and novelists are singularly apt in the use of the figure.

"When I began this book," Mr. Wilstach added, turning the sheets of proof that lay before him, "Rudyard Kipling and Robert Louis Stevenson had just begun to be heard from; but Joseph Conrad, O. Henry, and Irvin S. Cobb were unknown. I have been through the books of thousands of authors, secured a mass of similes from them, only to find when the time for compiling came that most of these garnerings were merely paraphrases from older writers. Indeed, I fancy I have discarded three times as many similes as will be found in the book. I have had hard work in running down the authorship of some curious colloquial similes.

"Here are three examples: 'Cold as an enthusiastic New England audience;' 'Noisy as a living skeleton having a fit on a hardwood floor;' and 'About as much privacy as a goldfish.' The first of these I had from the lips of James