



The Gentle Art of Newspaper Humor

A Review by
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**THE GENTLE ART OF COLUMN-
 ING. A Treatise on Comic Jour-
 nalism. By G. L. Edson. New
 York: Grosseton's, 1920. 177 pages.**

THIS is an amusing book on the proper methods to be followed by writers whose professional duty it is to be amusing. It is a manual of vocational training prepared by an expert. Mr. Edson has himself been charged with the responsibility for supplying a daily column of variegated witticisms, casual whimsies, pertinent parodies, impertinent quips, local hits and topical paragraphs, all arrows in the air as felly as it flies; and he has been fortunate enough to extract revelatory confessions from other journalistic ejaculators of jocularity. Three of Mr. Edson's friendly competitors have kindly provided prefaces—Don Marquis, Franklin P. Adams and Christopher Morley, and a paper by George Horace Lorimer is also reprinted here to serve as a fourth preface. Not often is the overture to a new book played by so skillful a stringed quartet; and if music hath charms to please the savage breast of a reviewer, he ought to begin the perusal of the book itself in an emolliently receptive mood.

It is itself an amusing volume, as I began by saying. I gather from it that Mr. Edson appears to think that the gentle art of columning is a new thing; but Solomon was wise in his generation when he denied novelty to anything. Nine times out of ten, or ninety-nine times out of a hundred, what seems at first glance to be a new thing is only an old thing in disguise, even Irish bulls, as Whewell said, were once calves in Greece. The comic column is not an absolutely new departure in journalism, it is only a new development. Apparently it dates from the "Sharps and Flats" of Eugene Field, who set a high standard for all his followers. But while Eugene Field's column was delightfully individual, because Field himself had a tricky whimsicality of his own, what he was doing was not unlike what had been done weekly by The Danbury News man, The Detroit Free Press man, The Burlington Hawk

Eye man, The Texas Siftings man and by a dozen or a score of other men on other papers in other towns—Charles H. Hoyt in Boston, Joel Chandler Harris in Atlanta, Harry B. Smith in Chicago.

Some day it is to be hoped that some scholar, undaunted by dusty toil and fortified with a sense of humor, will undertake to set forth seriously the history of comic journalism in America. He will have a double duty, first to deal with the humorous weeklies, and secondly with the humorous writers. He must commence by chronicling the ambitious beginning and untimely demise of the ill-starred weeklies, the Lantern, Mrs. Grundy, Punch-nello—all imitations of The London Punch, as that journal still admits itself to be an imitation of The Paris Charivari. In the "Fable for Critics" Lowell poured scorn on one of these American Punches, saying that it was

Like the London, no doubt
 With the lemon and sugar and spirits
 left out.

No American comic paper achieved popularity and prosperity until Schwartzmann, the shrewd publisher, Keppler, the vigorous cartoonist, and Bunner, the most versatile of editors, set Puck solidly upon his unshod feet; and when they died one after another, first Bunner, then Keppler and finally Schwartzmann, the once lively sheet languished, falling into unworthy hands before it too expired of inanition. Puck was not an imitation of Punch and this has probably also been a factor in favor of Life, which in John Mitchell's hands was as frankly American as Puck was in Bunner's.

After writing the obituaries of the long list of comic weeklies, the historian will have to give us in outline the biographies of the humorists who won their fleeting reputations in the dailies. Judge Longstreet, Major Jack Downing, Philander Q. K. Doesticks, Orpheus C. Kerr, these were all predecessors of Mr. Dooley and of Mr. George Ade, whose fame is not likely to be so ephemeral, since their fun is more fundamentally philosophical. I have not seen for twoscore years any of the volumes into which the lucubrations of Doesticks were collected; but I believe he was the original utterer of the profound thought that "there's a great difference between a fool and a damfool." Nor have I held in my hands for at least as long a period any of the Orpheus C. Kerr papers; but I can recall one of his unpretentious jocularities, to the effect that the population of the United

States was made up of Canctians, Cork-asians, and Burnt Cork-asians.

Perhaps I should apologize to Mr. Edson for quoting this innocent pleasantry, since it stands forth as a pun, naked and unashamed; and Mr. Edson has here laid down a code for the columnist, the first law in which reads: "Do not write Paragraphs with Puns on Names." He gives as Horrible Examples: "The Russians are rushin' the Finnish, who can see their finish" and "Austria is Hungary for a piece of Turkey." Then he tells us that "this is the lowest depth to which humor could descend." And certainly these Examples are truly Horrible. A little later, Mr. Edson admits an exception to his rule—punning is permissible when it is not on a proper name and when at the same time it has what Mr. Edson terms a "news-slant," that is when it possesses what Augustine Daly used to call "contemporaneous human interest," when it is absolutely timely, not only up to date, but up to the very last minute. He cites as an instance of this legitimate use of what has been contemptuously called the "lowest form of wit," this paragraph by Mr. Franklin P. Adams: "Homer Aids Boston to Conquer Giants.—TIMES headline. Yet the universities are abolishing Greek."

Far be it from me to attempt an apology for punning, if for no other reason than that it needs none. The empty and mechanical pun is beneath contempt, because it is empty, because it is mechanical, because it is within the command of any one who will loose his mind to it. But many good men and true, Charles Lamb for one and Lowell for another, have had a keen relish for playing with words even when, strictly speaking, they were not playing also with ideas.

A friend of mine, after reading in THE TIMES one of Mr. Wells's articles on the upper part of the page and then finding beneath it on the same page one of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones's clever dissections of Mr. Wells's screeds, remarked "I see; as so often happens, truth is at the bottom of the Wells."

A few years ago one of the questions put by the English examiners of the College Entrance Board was this: "In Shakespere's 'Twelfth Night' how did the Duke employ Viola, when she was disguised as a lad?" And one of my young friends—he was young then but he returned from France in the A. E. F. with the shoulder straps of a Captain—gave this accurate answer: "The

Duke employed Viola as a valet—to press his suit."

To my mind, but I may be prejudiced, neither of these puns needs any defense. Then there is the speech put by Hood into the mouth of the peddler who is proclaiming the merits of his ear-trumpets for the deaf:

I don't pretend with these horns of mine,
 Like some in the advertising line,
 To magnify sounds on such marvelous scales

That the sounds of a cod seem as large as a whale's.

There was Mrs. F.
 So very deaf

That she might have worn a percussion cap

And been knocked on the head without hearing it snap.

Well, I sold her a horn, and the very next day.

She heard from her husband in Botany Bay.

Lowell quoted this in his lecture on "Humor, Wit, Fun and Satire," saying that in Hood's comic verse there is "almost always a combination of wit and fun, the wit always suggesting the remote association of ideas and the fun jostling together the most obvious concords of sounds and discords of sense." The plea for the pun at its best, when it is least mechanical and when it is almost imaginative, could not be better put. I do not doubt, however, that Lowell shared Mr. Edson's abhorrence for the inexpensive punning on proper names. Mr. Edson has other rules of equal validity. For instance, he insists that "the Epigram should appeal more to the sense than to the ear." He cites as an example of the epigram which appeals to the ear, "Many a train of thought is just a string of empties," which sounds as though Oscar Wilde had manufactured it when he was weary, upon a midnight dark and dreary. From his examples of the epigram which appeals to the sense, I select two. The first is: "An idea is not always to blame for the people who believe in it." That has not a little of the felicity and of the insight of La Rochefoucauld; it rises above the level of the epigram to the loftier altitude of the aphorism. The second has a pun at the heart of it but is no worse for that: "Diplomatic relations are like poor relations—you never hear of them except when they are broke."

Theoretically the columnist is a monologue artist. That is what Eugene Field was. But if the columnist were condemned to rely only on himself his would be like the samphire's gatherers, "a dreadful trade." He would often find himself set to make bricks without straw—except the straws which show which

way the wind is blowing. But practically his case is not so hard, because he is now encompassed about by a cloud of contributors—voluntary assistants, who are eager to say their say and to see themselves in print. By setting a high standard for quips and quiddities which he is willing to accept and by according the honored and enviable position at the top of the column only to lyrics of obvious merit, he is enabled to stimulate the ambition of his unpaid recruits, who do not dare to proffer him verses which (in Dr. Holmes's apt phrase) are "candidates for the orthopedic asylum."

And here occasion serves to say that the technical dexterity of our newspaper poets is far better than it was before Bunner and Field set the pace. Their rhythm is captivating; and their rhymes are not only ingenious and unexpected, they are perfect. Today the "Croaker" lyrics of Halleck and Drake and Saxe's imitations of Praed and of Hood would not excite the attention which was theirs when they had no rivals. And the French forms, the triolet, the rondeau and the ballade, which Austin Dobson acclimated in English prosody as Horace had naturalized many Greek meters in Latin—these retain their vogue and lend them fittingly to the purposes of the newspaper lyrists.

Mr. Edson does not confine his advice to the proper conduct of the column alone; he deals also with the humorous editorial, and he deals with it adequately. Probably because journalism is ephemeral of necessity and therefore condemns its practitioners to the swift oblivion of the back number, Mr. Edson fails to mention George T. Lanigan, improviser of the undying threnody which commemorated the untimely demise of the Akboond of Swat, and author also of the "Fables" which deserve remembrance, although the thin little volume in which they were collected is now unattainable. And Mr. Edson also neglects to pay due meed of praise to W. L. Alden, who used to write comic editorials for THE NEW YORK TIMES, which linger in my memory after twoscore years as incomparable in their kind. Some of them were also reprinted in a volume, not easily accessible but deserving of resuscitation. I hope that Mr. Edson will be moved to look up Alden's editorial on "The Patented Girl"; and I know he will be grateful for having his attention called to it—as grateful as I am for his own amusing disquisition on the methods of preparing comic copy.