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A SENSE OF HUMOR

BY J. EARL CLAUSON

A SELF styled student of human nature has what he is pleased to call his acid test for a sense of humor. It consists of a certain story, of whose mirth provoking quality he is so well convinced that to find it other than a laugh compeller is to argue oneself not of the elect. The tale runs as follows:

The undertaker was preparing the remains of the very bald man for interment. As he was busy at this congenial task the bereaved widow stole into the room.

"I have brought you a pot of glue," she sobbed.

"Why, what is that for?" inquired the master of ceremonies in some astonishment.

"It occurred to me," she explained, "that you might need it for attaching poor John's toupee."

"That's very thoughtful of you," said the undertaker in his most sympathetic tones; "but you need not have bothered. I have used a couple of tacks."

Now, whether or not this is a funny story, it is an interesting one by reason of the widely different effect it has upon hearers. To most the first sensation is of outraged sensibilities. Many never experience any other. A few suffer no qualm, but express delight from the instant of the denouement. The proprietor of the tale argues that, as with some cheeses, a little feeling of repugnance is essential to full enjoyment of its delicate flavor. He is willing to admit, nevertheless, that the sense of humor is not wholly absent even from those who sustain no shock. The unfortunates who are adjudicated quite outside the pale are those individuals who blandly ask whether the undertaker followed the usual custom, or any other equally unappreciative question. They have failed to react to the test.

A SENSE of humor is one of the things we refer to in daily conversation, but find serious difficulty in defining. On some equally vague qualities we possess competent opinions; on genius, for instance, about which critics have always differed and always will, yet which the one universally acknowledged genius of the English race assures us is something "to madness near allied." But you shall search in vain for an explicit and authoritative comment on a "sense of humor." No maker of dictionaries has ever pretended to know what it is: had he known he would perhaps have followed another calling. There is no history of humor in which you may trace the evolution of this priceless possession from the seed to the ripe fruit of today. Perhaps humor antedates history itself, and was already in the flower when a testy Babylonian, shattering on the solid ivory skull of a fellow citizen the baked brick that was the comic weekly of his time, gave rise to the popular phrase, "cracking a joke."

Nor will everyone agree with the self styled student of human nature as to the infallibility of his acid test. Yet he is standing on the threshold of a great truth. Even if there were no other evidence in support of that contention, it is proved by the popularity in America of what may be called mortuary anecdotes, of which the foregoing and the following are fair examples:

MRS. BRONSON, a good hearted New England woman with an ineradicable weakness for the *faux pas*, remarked one afternoon to her daughter:

"I'm going over to comfort Mrs. Drake. You know Mr. Drake hanged himself in their attic last night."

"Oh, don't go, Mother!" protested the younger woman. "You always say the wrong thing."

"Yes, Mary, I feel it my duty to go," insisted Mrs. Bronson. "But I'll just talk about the weather. That's a perfectly safe subject."

Seated in Mrs. Drake's kitchen, she ventured, "What rainy weather we have had lately!"

"Yes, indeed," replied the widow. "I haven't been able to get the week's wash dried."

"Why, I shouldn't think you would have any trouble," Mrs. Bronson returned. "You have such a nice attic to hang things in."

HUMOR involves sentiment and character," wrote Giles. "Humor is of a genial quality, dwells in the same character with pathos, and is always mingled with sensibility." Yet not sentiment, not character, not even sensibility, is the dominant note of American humor; but whimsicality, and a sense of humor, as the phrase is understood here, involves, if it does not wholly consist of, an appreciation of whimsicality. Hence, such anecdotes as the foregoing. Death is always tragedy. To extract from it a laugh involves whimsicality. Such an undertaking is characteristically American. Queer epitaphs are so welcome that one vaudeville entertainer made them his stock in trade for years. Those he invented were never half so enthusiastically received by his audiences as the real ones he quoted.

It is as impossible to manufacture the equal of an unconsciously funny epitaph as to perpetrate in cold blood anything comparable with the phrasing of a set of resolutions adopted not many months ago by the grammar school masters of one of our larger cities:

"Whereas, Almighty God in His providence, and as we believe out of loving care for His children, has removed from our midst by death the superintendent of our schools—"

Or the enthusiastic assertion of an actor whom the late Kirke La Shelle, the author, observed was wearing a mourning band on his arm.

"It's for my father," the actor explained. "I've just come from his funeral."

La Shelle expressed his sympathy.

The actor's grief was obviously real and great. "I attended to all the funeral arrangements," he said. "We had everything just as Father would have liked it."

"Were there many there?" asked La Shelle.

"Were there?" cried the actor with pride. "Why, my boy, we turned them away!"

IT seems but yesterday when the anecdote of character had the right of way in these United States. Together with the stage Irishman and the mother in law wheeze, it has passed on—and "Oh, the difference!" to all of us. For, whether or not the b'gosh joke was true to life, there was something distinctly diverting about the figure it called to mind.

Material for a whole vaudeville sketch, for instance, is suggested by the story of the rival poultry farmers who, meeting on the highway, indulged in the following dialogue:

"Mornin', Si."
"Mornin', Hi."
"Wha'd you give your chickens when they had the pip?"
"Tu'pentine."
"Mornin', Si."
"Mornin', Hi."

A week passed and they met again. The conversation:

"Mornin', Si."
"Mornin', Hi."
"Wha'd you say you gave your chickens when they had the pip?"
"Tu'pentine."
"Wal, I gave mine tu'pentine, 'nd they died."
"So'd mine."
"Um-m-mornin', Si."
"Mornin', Hi."

BUT since the farmer has become the most opulent member of our body politic and has bought a barnful of touring cars, he is of as little actual use to the professional funny man as—well, as a Waterbury watch. Our colored brother still supplies a modicum of innocent amusement, to be sure, and it may pardonably be hoped that many a year will pass before he becomes too sophisticated to furnish such a tale as that of the old uncle with strong ethical convictions, which Congressman Nicholas Longworth tells.

This old negro was stopped in the street on election day by a white man who asked him whether he had voted.

"Yas, 'ndeed, I's voted," replied the negro.

"Did you get anything for your vote?"

"Oh, yas, Suh, I got paid for my vote."

"What did you get?"

"Well, Suh, it was laik dis. De Republicans come to me an' dey says dey give me eleven dollahs if me and mah three boys vote de Republican ticket, an' I took de money. An' de Democrats come to me and dey says dey give me seven dollahs fo' mah vote and mah boys' vote, an' I took de money."

"You took money from both sides? Then which ticket did you vote?"

"Oh, I voted de Democratic ticket."

"Why so? The Republicans gave you the most money."

"Yas, Suh, dat's why. I voted fo' de Democrats fo' jes' dat reason—dey wa'n't as corrupt as de Republicans."

HOWEVER greatly taste may change, there will always be circulation for such anecdotes as that of the old farmer drawn for jury duty in Southern Missouri. He had qualified satisfactorily to both sides, and his

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