

THE ART OF THE OFF-COLOR STORY

BY PARKE CUMMINGS

IN the Middle Ages most artists were anonymous and poorly paid. It was the Renaissance, with its emphasis on the individual man, that ushered in modern times. We have all heard of Botticelli, da Vinci, Brunelleschi, Michelangelo, Christopher Wren, Erasmus, and Shakespeare — all of whom got their names before the public and were paid, often handsomely, for their artistic labors.

The Renaissance idea prospered and today it is dominant. No creative artist in our times turns out a painting, a skyscraper, a novel, or even a two-line poem without reasonable prospect of seeing his efforts rewarded with a credit to nurture his ego and a check to fatten his bankroll. Art demands praise and cash.

But even in this era of florid ballyhoo and colossal pay-checks there is one form of creative art which flourishes in anonymity and is not corrupted by the dollar sign. I refer to the art of the off-color story. I have heard dirty stories since childhood, and so have you.

Thousands of them. On trains and street-cars, at outings and smokers, in homes and offices. Modern social intercourse is scarcely imaginable without the ministrations of this ancient and ever-fresh art. But I have yet to meet a person who has acknowledged inventing one, or who even knows someone else who has done so. Nor have I a single juicy anecdote to my own credit. Like Chartres, Rheims, and certain medieval murals, the dirty story is a product of genius unacknowledged and unsung.

I'm not discussing the spur-of-the-moment off-color remark. We have all come up with spontaneous flashes of this sort. "Do you like bathing beauties?" you are asked, and if you happen to think of it you retort, "I don't know; I never bathed any." But these are not dirty stories. They are gags. A dirty story, as its very name implies, is a *story*, with definite plot, setting, and characters. It has technique, form, laws of development. It's art.

Let me illustrate with an elementary example which, of course,

you have heard a thousand times: A salesman stops at a farmer's house and asks to be put up over night. . . . *There's the setting, the bucolic atmosphere, a first draft of the characters.* . . . The farmer consents, but indicates that his house boasts only one bed, and that the stranger will therefore have to share it with him and his young wife. . . . *There's the dramatic situation, the problem: crowded accommodations, as always in farmhouse stories.* . . . At dinner the pretty wife serves coleslaw, the salesman's favorite dish. He has several helpings and asks for more, but the farmer, who also likes his coleslaw, won't give it to him. . . . *Now we have characterization and conflict: a desirable woman, two men crazy about coleslaw, the farmer conservative, the city-slicker salesman a potential menace.* . . . Soon the trio go to bed, the farmer in the middle. In the middle of the night, they are awakened by noises and discover that the barn is on fire. . . . *The intrusion of fate here; the impact of something exterior to the immediate setting, as in any good drama or narrative.* . . . The farmer rushes out to save his barn, and the woman whispers to the salesman, "Now's your chance, stranger!" So the salesman dashes down to the icebox, and eats the rest of the coleslaw.

I have heard this classic told of beans and rice pudding, but its essentials are the same — an unexpected denouement, but one that can logically occur. Here, **you** must agree, are many of the ingredients that go into great art. It is no mere episode; vary the setting or characters, slip up on the details, and a balanced tale becomes meaningless.

Often, of course, the characters do not have to be elaborated, because they happen to be types known to the listener. Stock figures are employed in many other ancient arts. "Have you heard the one about Hitler — Mae West — Charlie McCarthy — ?" But the main point is that the creator of the dirty story invents a tale and obtains his effects in the skill of his narration. He doesn't merely crack wise. In short, the quip about bathing beauties differs from the coleslaw classic in the same fashion that remarking that the South must have had an unpleasant time during the Civil War differs from writing *Gone With the Wind*. One is comment, the other art.

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In an age when blood-donors, amateur tennis players, dwarfs, wrong-way fliers, tea-tasters, flag-pole sitters, fan-dancers, goldfish-eaters,

and thousands of other specialists capitalize on their talents, we have the curious paradox of the dirty story operating on a practically 100 per cent amateur basis — a Gothic set-up in an age of Hollywood, Winchell, and Simon and Schuster. The set-up *must* be an amateur one because a master of bawdiness cannot cash in on his talent. Magazines, theatres, book publishers, newspapers, and radio stations pay for material that will get by the censors, but most of the really great masterpieces of ribaldry cannot possibly be retailed by such media of communication to the general public.

It may be objected that these epics are sometimes revamped into skits or incorporated into songs for burlesque houses and uninhibited night clubs; or are cleaned up for reputable magazines, movies, and microphones. Everybody knows that bright young men put new coats and pants on old dirty stories, and make money in the process. But all that is beside the point. We are considering those who create art, not those who exploit it. The originators are aware that there isn't a nickel in it for themselves.

Indeed, I am doing these artists an injustice in demonstrating that their art cannot be commercialized. They are more likely the kind of

people who don't *want* their art commercialized. They create for the sheer joy of creating. Which is surely more than one can say for most writers of "clean" stuff. I have observed that the question most frequently put by would-be scribblers to established professionals is not "How good do you think it is?" but "Where do you think I should send it, and how much do you think I can get for it?"

No such thought enters the mind of him who makes up the ribald yarn. He is a genuine amateur, not in ability but in spirit — which is all-important. The contemporary world is a continual challenge to him. Every new industry, every new gadget, every new fad, every new political situation, and, particularly, every glamorous female in the public eye sets the wheels in his brain to turning. Others may grub for royalties and commissions and Hollywood salaries, but he is moved to give the world a new side-splitter about trailers, sun glasses, nudist colonies, trial marriages, Goebbels' love-life, the New Deal, or the cinema's latest Oomph Girl.

True, most dirty stories are variations on old ones which go back to Boccaccio or even into the dim recesses of antiquity. But in "clean" literature, doesn't the same thing

hold true? Are there not only a very few original plots, all of them millennia old? It is in skilful variations that true art lies. Beethoven used the same notes a third-rate Tin Pan Alley tunesmith does. How he arranged them was all-important. Shakespeare is supposed to have cribbed his *Macbeth* from Hollinshed's Chronicles. But it is Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, not Hollinshed's. Most dirty stories are concerned with what a man and a woman do or fail to do. But it is who they are, what they are like, and the circumstances that determine the artistic value of the story.

I think a toast is in order to the anonymous and unrewarded throwbacks to medieval times who have given us such enduring classics as

"Believe it or not, I was waiting for a street car," "Hey, mister, somebody stole my automobile!" "If you were a gentleman you would take off that fur coat!" "One, two, three, hello, sweetheart!" "I'm the damned fool who slept in the barn," "And for me — nothing?"

A toast is in order to the generous souls who invented the sagas of the traveling salesmen, the farmer's daughters, the beautiful stenographers, the bashful bridegrooms and brides, the legends of Pola Negri, Peaches Browning, Marlene Dietrich, and Mae West.

Unrewarded, did I say? A thousand times no. Even in this cynical and materialistic age, the old proverb still holds good. Lack of virtue is its own reward.



TWO RECIPES FOR PEACE

FOR THE USA

Shall the United States continue to sell instruments of death to the Hitler-Japanese war machine, to permit them to advance their plans of world conquest? Find the name of your congressman and wire him urging an embargo on Japan. This is the best thing you can do to keep America out of war.

— The communist *Sunday Worker*.

FOR THE USSR

The Soviet Union continues to buy and sell from and to the fascist countries because such a cessation of trade would be equivalent to a government embargo. Such a single-handed action by the Soviet Union would amount to a practical declaration of hostilities. . . . The Soviet Union must be careful not to allow itself, as Stalin said, "to be involved in conflicts by instigators of war. . . ."

— The Communist *New Masses*.

CAROL, RUMANIA'S GLAMOUR KING

BY WILLI SCHLAMM

His life might have been written by Anthony Hope and directed for the screen by Ernst Lubitsch. It has heart-throb, excitement, and glamour. His looks would qualify him to play the lead in person, even by Hollywood standards. But he won't resort to Hollywood; after a few false starts he is doing nicely in the profession he was born into. And he has a genuine talent for making money. Carol II of Rumania has proved himself the best business man among European Kings since Leopold of the Belgians turned the Congo into a profitable private enterprise. It is just possible that he may turn one of the neatest tricks ever attempted: the trick of making money out of Hitler.

In the modern world royalty, where it survives, has been largely divorced from power. Not so with Carol. He is boss in Rumania, his own Duce—owner, manager, head salesman. Though born to the throne, he is a self-made king. Until recently his country had the most democratic constitution in

Europe, an almost verbatim copy of the American Constitution. Today any Rumanian naïve enough to take this document seriously would be promptly jailed, and perhaps "shot while trying to escape" soon thereafter. Probably no democratic Rumanian would commit such an indiscretion, because—ironically enough—King Carol at the moment represents the only hope of Rumanians who love liberty and would safeguard it from Nazi raids.

Carol, who is now 46, is descended on his father's side from the princely German house of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen; on his mother's he is a great-grandson of Queen Victoria. Rumanians are apt to shudder when they think of the German link. They are aware of Herr Hitler's far-fetched logic in enlarging his Third Reich; Balkan states under dynasties of German origin are exposed to that logic. But the British link gives them hope. Patriotic Rumanians are inclined to regard their sovereign's family connections with British royalty as a sort of insurance.