

# IRVIN S. COBB: ASK HIM ANOTHER

By Grant Overton

**G**ROPING for the universal simile — page Mr. Wilstach — I can only say that Irvin S. Cobb is the Babe Ruth of fiction, the Mussolini of humor, and the anecdote's Best Friend. Take all the writers who have ever contributed to "The Saturday Evening Post" — no, that won't do. Take all the writers who have ever contributed to American magazines, including the Scandinavian, and take all the reporters who have contributed to American newspapers, including the feature writers at the Snyder murder trial, and how many of them do you remember? You say: "Well, of course, there was Mark Twain and Bret Harte, and there was Irvin Cobb." Enter any doctor's office or any hospital throughout the English-approximating countries and what one book, besides "The Care and Feeding of Children", do you find on the premises? A volume called "Speaking of Operations", Irvin S. Cobb speaking. Who invented the Negro story, if he did not actually invent the Negro himself? I. S. Cobb. Who issued the Emancipation Proclamation in behalf of the southern gentleman and cast off from him forever the shackles of a Confederate Colonelcy? I. Shrewsbury Cobb. Who was the president of the Confederate States? Old Judge Priest. Who discovered the secret of A Laugh a Day? I. S. C. are the initials and Scranton, Pennsylvania, can take them or leave them. Columbus stubbed his toe upon America, but who has recently completed the first extensive researches into sixteen of the United States and

one region thereto adjacent? C-o-b-b.

Such are a few of the lesser claims upon our consideration made by the subject of this article. His greatest distinction may as well be pointed out now. I was going to save it for the end, but I guess I can find something else.

Irvin Cobb is the living witness to some millions of his fellow countrymen, and chiefly persons of his own sex, that a writing fellow is not necessarily a deviation from male normalcy.

Now because this is or until recently was a delicate topic I am not going to beat around the bush any. Let me not la-di-da. The ineradicable instinct of the male members of the human race is to regard with suspicion anyone who writes. Anyone who wears trousers, that is. It does not matter that Dr. Johnson wore trousers; no one except Boswell ever saw them, for Samuel was always clad in a greatcoat. Mark Twain does not help; his bifurcations were of snowy flannel. But it is everywhere known that old Irv Cobb not only wears pants but on one or more occasions has been observed to adjust a vertical strap worn in relation to pants and being a portion of what are called suspenders. Suspenders! Mind you, I do not say he has had them on in recent years; the point is immaterial. You just know he has worn 'em.

Other men take one good look and they know that this was the face that launched a thousand quips. They read Cobb's stuff and it tastes as juicy as a fresh-boiled ear of corn. But the great decision comes as they study, not

his literary style, but his personal contours. Gazing upon him, they see what Cobb himself saw, and so aptly described, when once he held the mirror up to nature. In his own words, "he is rather bulky, standing six feet high, not especially beautiful, a light roan in color, with a black mane. His figure is undecided. He has always voted the Democratic ticket. He has had one wife and one child and still has them. In religion he is an Innocent Bystander."

#### SPEAKING OF HUMORISTS

The first essential in a humorist is that he shall be a humanist. Since he must be exceedingly careful whom he laughs at, he mostly laughs at himself, with a cordial invitation to others to join in this harmless pastime. The invitation is nearly always accepted. Occasionally, in the presence of a fairly homogeneous audience, the humorist may practise upon someone else with safety. But let me illustrate.

"There were two Irishmen named Pat and Mike." This is funny; and yet at meetings of the Hibernian Society it is as well to have the speaker himself Irish — but of course he would be.

"There were two Englishmen named St. John (Sinjun) and Abercrombie (Crumb)." Funny throughout the United States and territorial possessions, but usually omitted at gatherings of the Pilgrims Society.

"There were two Americans named George F. Babbitt and Elmer Gantry." This is not funny at all.

"From first to last, upwards of a hundred different ticks let me have their patronage. I learned to scratch with the Australian crawl stroke and with the Spencerian free hand movement simultaneously." This is universally funny and loses nothing when

translated into other languages. Cobb speaks for himself; it's a laugh, it cert'nly is.

"Cobb's Anatomy", "Cobb's Bill of Fare", the famous surgical treatise, "One Third Off" — all are what we now know as Confession Books. God gave Cobb twenty senses and he has put them all at our disposal in fifteen volumes of fiction and fifteen books of wit and humor appearing punctually in the last fifteen years. Statistically considered — and we seem to have become nothing unless statistical; when you feel you are slightly static there is no refuge like statistics — statistically considered (I repeat) there is a Cobb for every taste. But the inclusive and perhaps the definitive Cobb is to be found in his latest book, "Some United States".

He subtitles the work, "a series of stops in various parts of this nation with one excursion across the line", the last chapter dealing with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. The first sixteen chapters are devoted to Maine, Kansas, California, Kentucky, New York, Wyoming, Texas, Wisconsin, Oregon, more Oregon, Virginia, New Jersey, Indiana, North Carolina, Arizona, and Louisiana. "The plan I have in mind is to pick out certain States which appear to me to have personalities." In an attempt to write a separate piece about each separate State, "I should run out of material long before I ran out of States."

I am not so sure of that, but at any rate the seventeen chapters of "Some United States" are ample to illustrate Cobb's qualities as a humorist — and more than a humorist. For the striking thing about a genuine humorist is that he knows with precision when to be in earnest. Cobb may jest about the hotel bed in Kansas — "through the flimsy mattress I could see the

uplifted shapes of the springs where they were coiled to strike" — but in the more fundamental matter of Kansas lawmaking he neither misunderstands nor menckens. Behind those billboards lies New Jersey. Cobb duly notes the billboards — he has apparently made a study of them deserving the award of a Ph.D., or anyway an Adv.D. But Cobb, with television of whatever sort, sees back of the boards the televisistas which certainly do still exist in Burlington County and Sussex and up the Water Gap way. Much of Cobb's United States is scenery, although I cannot find that he errs by attributing to any State more scenery than it actually has; but mostly he deals with people. And readers of his book are going to realize that Cobb is almost the first to know and appraise our country's true natural resources in anything like their variety and richness. He knows our natural resources from Abe Martin to Ziegfeld.

Tall corn in a bottomland  
With the wild morning glories  
Coiling about its stalks  
And its cutlass blades rasping together —

Pardon me, I am not quoting Carl Sandburg. The above lines are part of a sentence by Cobb in his chapter on Louisiana. Such vigorous felicity of descriptive phrase is not rare in Cobb. A humorist is a man who can make his adjectives keep in line and his verbs obey the "Forward, march!"

A real Virginia supper — nothing elaborate, you understand, only three kinds of hot bread and in the meat line merely a country-cured ham and a platter of broiled quail and a few running yards of smoked sausage and first one thing and then another. This way and that, like the incense from their pipes, the talk will go eddying. But no matter what turn it takes, underlying it and savoring it as the hickory smoke savors their Smithfields, and spicing and sweetening it as the autumn frosts sweeten their Albemarle pippins, is an essence of composite traditions that is distinctly Virginian.

If I found an appropriate context in the works of Mark Twain and inserted this appreciation in it no one would find the passage apocryphal. A humorist is a fellow who homecures his sentiment with hickory smoke.

A humorist is a ham. Meaty, super-digestible, properly smoked and seasoned. Juicy. His wit is used sparingly, stuck in here and there, like the tiny cloves that speckle the rich rind of his proper substance.

Cobb is a great humorist because he is most other things first.

#### SPEAKING OF SHORT STORY WRITERS

Everything is known about the short story and much of it can be formulated in a few excellent rules.

A short story is always something significant happening to somebody. On the structural side, it is related to the play, not to the novel. Therefore it generally consists of a great many little scenes, with the curtain almost imperceptibly descending on one and instantly rising on another. To cover a lapse of time and give necessary information short narrative passages, often somewhat disguised, are resorted to. The author must know his end before he starts, in the sense that a playwright must, and in a sense in which the novelist need not. A mental outline, often of great exactitude, may suffice; some writers find that as soon as they outline a story on paper that story is dead for them. As with longer fiction, the backbone of the short story is sound characterization; form and even movement are of less importance. Characterization must be through action and speech; it must be recognizable to the reader, that is, identified by his knowledge of human nature or some tradition or hearsay that he accepts. Characterization that depends on the reader's imagination is

unsafe. Nor can his identification of human nature be presumed to be wide or profound. A person may or may not respond emotionally to a lonely house, a sunset, or snow tented mountains; he usually feels something or other toward another person. A reader may or may not comprehend or believe an incident; he slides over it; his interest, if he have any, is in some actor. Realism is easy, but without good characterization there is never any reality.

All these principles and others are easy of formulation. Rules — no more dangerous than rules in any art — can be made and used in the work. It is presumed to teach the short story, and facility in it can certainly be acquired. To have something to say is the old, insoluble problem.

And that something to say must, after all, always go unsaid — by the author. Perhaps the perfect short story is one which takes the words out of the author's mouth and puts them in the reader's.

Irvin S. Cobb habitually breaks all the commandments for the short story. He likes narrative, and instead of using it to the short, necessary extent he uses it, most often, for its own sake. A looser, more ambling short story writer never lived. A more formless short story writer never achieved success. He resembles a fighter in the ring, and his story may possibly go only ten rounds but is more likely to last twenty. His story proceeds by rounds; you hear the gong, see Cobb in his corner; the gong sounds and he is back in the ring. He takes more punishment than any writer now before the public. We have seen him, like Firpo, land a terrible punch early in the bout and send his story somersaulting over the ropes. In spite of his ponderosity he is quick on his feet; his immense

deliberation is really deliberate and never due to lack of speed. Dozens of short story writers can outbox him; in truth, when Cobb is fighting a story the only boxing he does is of the compass. He always leads with his right — but watch his left. He has two methods of fighting and only two: having in his own time hammered the story to pieces he proceeds to skin it alive and hang the hide in front of us, or else he delivers a swift blow that floors the reader almost as effectually as it finishes the battle. The count is ten; it may be a hundred.

To abandon a fascinating but foolish figure, we may ask ourselves: How does he do it? In the first place, he has perfect nerves. The horror story, to succeed with all readers in every age, requires such. If you are going to be in the least hectic with your horror, like Poe, you may make the timorous shrink and the artistic quiver and the imaginative soul contract. But you will get a good many complaints that the reception is poor. That has never been charged against (for examples) "An Occurrence Up a Side Street" or "Darkness" or "Snake Doctor". The longest wave length is the shortest way home.

Again, Cobb is a saturation. Everything he writes is decisively dyed with a rich, irrevocable stain — all wool homespun steeped in butternut juice. As with most of the perdurable figures of literature, one pays less attention to the particular subject or the particular story; one cares for Cobb.

But it is his mastery of characterization which enables Cobb, in writing a story, to revoke without penalty, drive in the rough and land his niblick on the green, and indulge with impunity in the uncompleted forward pass. Old Judge Priest and not the eminent John Marshall is America's most celebrated

jurist. I admit that Jeff Poindexter is still less widely known than Uncle Tom of Cabin fame. But for thousands of us the sight of a man with shackled wrists will never fail to recall the escape of Mr. Trimm. Sergeant Jimmy Bagby, Herman Felsburg, and several others scarcely get their due because of Judge Priest's stature. Cobb's characters can become types without losing their integrity as individuals; if you question that, reread a short story entitled "Boys Will Be Boys".

This is the man who made his first serious effort at writing fiction in 1910,

when he was thirty four. He has a few other distinctions not noticed in this feeble essay. He is an incomparable teller of anecdotes, and when he speaks extemporaneously professional talkers go home and tear up their lecture material.

It used to be said, in the desperate effort to find some limitation in Irvin Cobb, that he never had written a novel; most likely he was incapable of writing a novel. But now he has written a novel. It is called "Chivalry Peak". It will appear in book form right soon. So now you must ask him another.

## SMALL SONGS FOR A SMALL DAUGHTER

By Marion Strobel

### "PRETTY"

"**P**RETTY", you say of an elephant.  
"Pretty", you say of a kangaroo —  
Every monkey in the zoo  
Is pretty to you!

But if you see a violet,  
Or if you see a cream-white rose,  
You only purse your mouth a bit  
And wriggle your nose!

### FIRST SORROW

"**N**EVER mind. It's not worth crying  
Over a dusty chicken feather  
Holding the broken ends and trying  
To make them grow together —

Never mind, my dear, my dear  
I'll find you twenty feathers more."  
You look as if you didn't hear,  
You answer me, "What for?"