



Drawn by Reginald Birch

THE ART OF REPARTEE

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS

DOCTOR HOLMES once declared that the bound volumes of comic papers were "cemeteries of hilarity, interspersed with cenotaphs of wit and humor." Probably he would have admitted that only the cypress and the yew could supply appropriate shelving for the second-rate comic plays of the immediate past, brisk enough in the performance not so very long ago, and yet sadly old-fashioned now that our taste in jokes has changed. Still, a wise word or a witty may be gleaned even from these forlorn pieces, which we may dismiss with what the colored gentleman once called "despisery." In a forgotten English comedy of the second half of the nineteenth century, a man, describing the only kind of woman he would be willing to marry, asserted that she must be a clever woman, a very clever woman—"a woman clever enough to begin a conversation with a repartee!" This is evidence that bachelors are ever unreasonable in the demands they make upon spinsters, since

there never was a woman clever enough to open a conversation with a retort. Any dictionary will remind us that a mere smart saying, a glittering epigram, a brilliant witticism, is not entitled to be received as a repartee unless it is a rejoinder. The exact definition of repartee is "a clever, ready, and witty retort." That is to say, it is not only the parry of your adversary's lunge; it is a counter-thrust that goes home under his guard. In other words, repartee is really a weapon of self-defense. In fact, it is often the twisting of the adversary's attack so that he is pierced by his own blade—and so much the worse for him if it is poisoned.

In one of the *Leatherstocking* tales, Cooper narrates that *Natty Bumppo* was engaged in single combat with an adroit Indian foe, and that the redskin finally cast his tomahawk at the white hunter. *Leatherstocking* swiftly stepped aside, and with inconceivable dexterity caught the glittering weapon as it flew through the air, and with unerring aim hurled it back,

to sink into the brain of his supple enemy. That was a true repartee—the rejoinder of the backwoods, the retort in kind, which closes a conversation and renders all further discussion unnecessary. It is therefore quite different from *Leatherstocking's* marvelous feats of marksmanship, when he drew a bead on a distant foe and dropped him in his tracks before the enemy knew what had hit him.

If we accept this distinction, as I think we must, we are forced to rule out a host of unexpected witticisms, spontaneously generated, and yet devoid of this element of rejoinder. They may be as rapid and as recreative as the true repartee, but they lack this necessary element of self-defense, of legitimate reprisal. Congreve once told Colley Cibber that there were many witty speeches in one of Colley's comedies, and also many speeches that looked witty and yet were not really what they seemed at first sight. So there are delightfully sudden flashes of wit which look like repartees, and yet are not when they are examined more closely. They are none the less delightful, but they are to be classified under another head. Here is an example of the instantaneous quip which is not a true repartee, felicitous as it is. Some years ago a friend of Mr. Oliver Herford's was going to Europe on the *Celtic*, and the evening before his departure Mr. Herford called him up on the telephone to say good-by. He asked what ship his friend was going on, and some imp of the perverse prompted the friend to answer that he was sailing on the *Keltic*. Mr. Herford promptly responded, "Don't say that, or you will have a hard C all the way over!"

We come a little closer to the genuine rejoinder, and again without attaining it, in a sharp turn attributed to Voltaire. That arch-wit was once speaking in praise of a certain contemporary man of letters, and a bystander remarked that it was very good of M. de Voltaire to say pleasant things of this man, since he was always saying unpleasant things of Voltaire; whereupon Voltaire smiled sweetly and suggested, "Perhaps we are both of us mistaken." This may be accepted as a retort to an absent adversary. It has the obvious element of self-defense, which is ever the essential quality of the true repartee, and it recalls the wise saying that

it is the man who returns the first blow that begins the quarrel.

Voltaire's rejoinder is characteristically neat. It has the dexterity of the Oriental executioner, who seemed only to be flourishing his sword until he presented his snuff-box, whereupon the victim promptly sneezed his amputated head from his unsuspecting shoulders. It is in marked contrast to the surly brutality of Dr. Johnson's verbal boxing, which only too often justified Goldsmith's shrewd assertion that whenever Johnson's pistol missed fire, he knocked you down with the butt. After all, the proper weapon for the accomplished master of fence is the delicate duelling-sword and not the bludgeon or the boomerang, even if these more vulgar instruments may also be wielded with deadly effect. At bottom, what gives to the true repartee its utmost effect is the fact that the engineer has been hoist by his own petard; he is summarily disposed of while the rest of us are dazzled by the unforeseen sparks of the explosion.

Speaker Reed was once discussing the merits of President Harrison with a fellow-congressman, who, remembering that Reed's well-known dislike of the President was heightened by the fact that in the appointment of a collector of the port of Portland Reed's candidate had been turned down for that of the Maine senators, said:

"Of course, Mr. Reed, I know that Mr. Harrison can't say 'No' gracefully."

At which Reed flashed out: "Oh, it's worse than that. He can't say 'Yes' gracefully."

The mention of Reed leads naturally to the mention of Bismarck, also a master of debate in his own lordly fashion. In the days when the Seven Weeks' War with Austria was already looming in the distance, a French minister at one of the German courts protested against Prussia's conduct and warned Bismarck that, if it continued, it would lead Prussia straight to Jena. Bismarck looked the Frenchman in the eye and asked the simple question, "Why not to Waterloo?"

In like manner the mention of Waterloo leads naturally to the mention of Napoleon and Talleyrand, who were necessary to each other, but who often crossed swords, nevertheless. When Talleyrand was created Prince of Bénévent, he pre-

sented his wife to the emperor. Napoleon knew that the new princess resembled the heroine of the modern problem-play in that she was

A lady with a record
Whose career was rather checkered,

so he expressed his hope that her conduct in the future would be in accord with her exalted rank. And Talleyrand bowed, and responded that Mme. de Talleyrand would undoubtedly pattern her conduct on that of the empress. He knew, and he knew that Napoleon knew that he knew, how much scandal had attached to the conduct of Josephine even after she had married Napoleon.

In one of the bitter scenes of altercation which were not infrequent between Napoleon and his indispensable minister, the emperor declared that Talleyrand probably expected to be chief of the regency if Napoleon died. "But remember this," threatened the irate sovereign, "if I fall dangerously ill, you will be dead before me." And Talleyrand bowed ceremoniously and answered, "Sire, I did not need this warning to address to heaven my most ardent wishes for the conservation of Your Majesty's health."

On another occasion Talleyrand heard a certain general talking contemptuously of a class of persons whom he designated as *pékins*. Talleyrand asked who were the creatures so curtly dismissed as unworthy of regard. The general gladly explained that, "We soldiers call everybody a *pékin* who is not military." And Talleyrand accepted the explanation with his usual suavity. "I see," he said, "it is just like what we do when we call anybody military who is not civil."

Many of the best of Talleyrand's good things are to be classed as true repartee; but on occasion he was tempted by his readiness of wit to puncture pretenders even when he himself had not been attacked. When a silly young fellow, seated between Mme. de Staël and Mme. Récamier, had the folly to insult both ladies by the remark that he was now between wit and beauty, Talleyrand could not resist the temptation. "Yes," he remarked, "and without possessing either." At first glance this may look like an unprovoked assault; and yet it may be defended really as a repartee, since it was

due to the desire to avenge a thoughtless slur on two ladies to whom he was greatly attracted. Indeed, Mme. de Staël, when she was most intimate with Talleyrand, was not a little jealous of Mme. Récamier. Once she inquired of Talleyrand which of them he would fish out of the water if she and Mme. Récamier happened to fall in at the same time. And again Talleyrand was equal to the occasion. With his most flattering smile he replied, "Ah, Madame, you swim so well."

There is a charming subtlety about this which seems characteristically French. It is as different as possible from the straightforward, knockdown blow which might have been expected from Dr. Johnson, with his Anglo-Saxon robustness of retort. And yet the Anglo-Saxon can now and again attain to an easy felicity that a Frenchman might envy. When the late Maurice Barrymore was once holding forth with his exuberant humor, an intoxicated bystander rudely interrupted by crying out, "You're a liar!" Barrymore was known to be a handy man with his fists, and the spectators expected a swift blow from the shoulder. It came only from the lips. Barrymore saw the man's condition, and with a light laugh responded, "Surely not—if you say so!"

This may be accepted as the repartee in all its nakedness. In fact, the repartee is almost always an ingenious variation of the everlasting retort, "You're another!" It is contained in its simplest form in the ancient and honorable dialogue which begins, "You're no gentleman!" and which ends, "You're no judge!" There is a variant of this which describes the fisticuffs of two rude fellows of the baser sort, one of whom is heard to declare, "I'll learn you to behave like a gentleman!" whereat the other insists, "I defy you to do it." And we may discover an analogy between these two masculine repartees and a feminine repartee credited to a British suffragette. A puny male offensively thrust himself forward and interrupted the lady's eloquent address with the irrelevant query, "Would n't you jolly well like to be a man?" And the champion of the fair sex instantly proved its superiority by the counter-question, "Would n't you?"

By the side of this intersexual retort

may be placed several international repartees, all credited to that anonymous but fascinating entity, the American Girl. Once when a Beef-eater at the Tower of London was displaying its treasures to a party of transatlantic pilgrims, he drew special attention to a certain gun, "captured at the battle of Bunker Hill, ladies and gentlemen!" And then the American Girl rose to the occasion. "I see," she said meekly, "you have the cannon, and we have the hill." This is perhaps a little sharper and less obvious than another of her retorts, called forth by the remark of an English lady to the effect that she could see "no reason why you Americans seem to think so much of your own country." Then the American Girl replied languidly, "I suppose it must be because we have seen some of the other countries." Closely akin to this is her swift response to another British dame who had read in the London papers horrible details about evil doings in the United States and who was thereby moved to suggest that if things did not improve, it might be necessary to send over an army to chastise us. Whereupon the American Girl affected surprise and asked, "What—again?"

When Oscar Wilde came to the United States to lecture on esthetics in his highly esthetic velvet costume,—and incidentally to prepare the public mind for the proper appreciation of Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience," in which the esthetic movement was held up to ridicule,—he used to complain that America was very uninteresting since it had "no antiquities and no curiosities." But he ventured on this disparagement once too often, for in the course of his travels he uttered it to the American Girl, and she replied with the demure depravity of candid innocence that this was not quite a fair reproach, since "we shall have the antiquities in time, and we are already importing the curiosities."

Lamb once declared that it was some compensation for growing old that in his youth he had seen the "School for Scandal" acted by the incomparable cast that illuminated the original performance; and perhaps the present writer may discover a like compensation in the fact that he can recall the elder Sothorn's rich and mellow rendering of "The Crushed Tragedian."

Hazlitt—writing, it is true, before the full flowering of the modern novel—asserted that "to read a good comedy is to keep the best company in the world, where the best things are said and the most amusing happen." Yet even better than the reading of a good comedy, entertaining as that may be, is the recalling of its performance, with the echo of its best things in our ears and with the memory of its amusing happenings rising unbidden before our eyes. "The Crushed Tragedian" was not a very good comedy, taken as a whole; but Sothorn's performance of the broken-down old actor was a delight that no one who ever enjoyed it would willingly forget. Rising on the top wave of joyous recollection is the superb attitude of triumph assumed by Sothorn as the old actor transfixes one of the other characters with what he believes to be a master stroke of repartee. The other character is an old banker, who, when he learns that Sothorn is an actor, makes the lordly remark that "it is twenty years since I have been in a theater." This gives the crushed tragedian his chance, and with immense scorn he hurls back the withering words, "It is about the same time since *I* have been in a *bank*!"

This is transcendental in its sublimity. It is very much more felicitous than the more obvious rejoinder in one of Augier's comedies, in the course of which two friends discover that they have made a mistake. "What fools we have been!" one of them admits; and the other, a little nettled, replies, "Put that in the singular." "Certainly," the first retorts; "what a fool *you* have been!" Obvious as this is, and inexpensive as it must be allowed, it falls completely within the definition of the repartee. Not a few other examples might be picked from the pages of the younger Dumas and Beaumarchais, as well as from those of Sheridan and Congreve. Perhaps it is because actors are in the habit of taking part in the amusing happenings of good comedies, and of uttering the good things prepared for them by the authors, that they are encouraged to achieve good things of their own. During the run of the "Blue Bird" in New York last winter, a friend of the late Jacob Wendell (who played the part of the faithful *Dog* in Maeterlinck's fairy allegory) met him at The Players. This

friend praised Wendell's performance of the canine character, with the sole reservation of the barking. That, the volunteer critic insisted, was not so true to life as it should be; he declared finally, "I could just naturally bark better than that myself." And Wendell gravely expostulated, "Ah, but, you see, I had to learn my bark."

This may be taken as an example of the retort courteous, although it is not as gentle as one of Thackeray's. When the novelist made his single attempt to be elected to Parliament, he happened one day to meet the rival candidate, who parted from him with the familiar Anglo-Saxon phrase, "May the best man win!" To this Thackeray instantly responded, "I hope *not!*" Thackeray's collaborator in the pages of *Punch*, Douglas Jerrold, was incapable of a suave rejoinder of this sort. Jerrold was in fact a little like Dr. Johnson, in his disregard for the feelings of others and in his willingness to give pain for the pleasure of his own wit. When Bentley the publisher told Jerrold that he had at first intended to call his new magazine the "Wit's Miscellany" but had finally decided to style it "Bentley's Miscellany," Jerrold smiled bitterly and said, "Well, you need n't have gone to the other extreme." This is not a true repartee, since it was wholly gratuitous, being entirely without provocation.

The sole justification for the bold retort is that it is a weapon of self-defense. Tennyson, so we were told, used to delight in narrating a rejoinder of a certain more or less disreputable man about town, named Trumpington, who was a crony of George IV. Once when the king came down to a seaside resort, he met his friend with the remark, "I hear you are the biggest blackguard in the place." And Trumpington bowed and responded, "I hope Your Majesty has not come down here to take away my character." By the side of this may be put a remark of Ben Butler's during the Cr dit Mobilier debate of 1873, perhaps not strictly a repartee by the definition insisted upon in these pages, and yet so near to the margin of the definition that it deserves mention here. Butler had objected to an elaborate and unduly distended speech of an opponent, who expostulated, with the plea that he had expected to divide time with the

honorable gentleman opposite. To this Butler retorted: "Divide time? It looks to me more like dividing eternity."

There is an epigram often attributed to Sheridan, but really composed by Lewis, the author of "The Monk," which preserves in rhyme a repartee that may have been due originally to Sheridan himself:

Lord Erskine, at woman presuming to rail,
Called a wife, "a tin canister tied to one's
tail."

And fair Lady Anne, while the subject he
carries on,

Seems hurt by his lordship's degrading
comparison.

But wherefore degrading? Considered
aright,

A canister's useful and polished and bright;
And should dirt its original purity hide—

That's the fault of the puppy to whom it is
tied.

On one occasion, at least, Sheridan and Lewis sparred, and the author of the "School for Scandal" countered neatly on the author of the "Castle Specter." This last piece was a tawdry melodrama which had proved very attractive at Drury Lane, although it had not brought to Lewis what he believed to be a proportionate share of its profits. By chance the manager and the author had a dispute about some question of the hour, and Lewis offered to back his opinion with a bet. "I'll make a big bet," he cried; "I'll bet you what you have made by my play." "No," retorted Sheridan, "I'll make only a little bet. I'll bet you what your play is really worth."

It is an interesting fact that Sheridan, prodigal as he was of wit in life as in literature, was sparing of repartee, or at least that his repartee was rarely or never offensive. His humor was good humor also, and that can rarely be said of a wit. Moore, in his memorial poem, declared that Sheridan's wit

Ne'er carried a heart-stain away on its
blade.

Sheridan was liked by those he laughed at. He was that rare character, a wit, ready at repartee, and yet not feared. He was popular, notwithstanding Chesterfield's wise remark that to be known as a

wit "is a very unpopular denomination, as it carries terror along with it; and people in general are as much afraid of a live wit, in company, as a woman is of a gun, which she thinks may go off of itself and do her a mischief." If wit is a gun, repartee is sometimes a gun that kicks and sorely bruises the shoulder of him who fires it. A weapon of self-defense it may be, but, like other weapons, it sometimes proves a dangerous possession. Perhaps a time may come when men will not be allowed to carry wit concealed about their persons without a special permit from the municipal authorities, to be granted only to those who can bring testimonials to the gentleness of their character.

Even this will not safeguard international relations. While the immense majority of recorded repartees are oral, the repartee may be epistolary. It may be a long-range engine of war, killing its man far beyond the borders of the country where the original offense was given. Sometimes the epistolary repartee is confined to the postscript of the letter, a sting in the tail of it. Sometimes it is condensed into the letter itself, which then needs no appendix. A score of years ago a British poetaster, who here may be termed Mr. Black, sent a volume of his verses to an American acquaintance, who may here be called Mr. White. The American recipient immediately acknow-

ledged the gift courteously, put the book on his shelves, and thought no more about it, until a month or two later he read an adverse notice of it in a weekly paper, which may here be styled the "Bookreviewer." Three weeks thereafter, or just long enough an interval for that number of the weekly to get across the Atlantic and for a letter to return, the American received this missive from the British versifier:

Dear Mr. White:

Sorry the "Bookreviewer" attacked me in such a spiteful manner. Why was it?

Faithfully yours,

A. BLACK.

P.S. I presume it would be your copy of the book that they reviewed, as my publishers did not send a copy to the "Bookreviewer."

Five minutes after the American had read this wail of woe, his answer was in the hands of the post-office. It was not encumbered by any postscript; and it read as follows:

Dear Mr. Black:

I hasten to assure you that it was not my copy of your book which the "Bookreviewer" had, as that copy has not been read by anybody.

Yours cordially,

B. WHITE.

SILENCE

BY EDITH WILLIS LINN

I AM the warden of the seals of sleep,
 Grim shepherd of the restless hours that stray
 Like lambs along a tranquil country way.
 Mine are the vigils that the lonely keep;
 Dead cities where the desert sands drift deep;
 Songs man once sang, prayers that he used to pray.
 Mine is to-morrow, mine is yesterday,
 The stars that beckon and the mists that creep.
 I claim alike the singer and the song.
 The ancient sphinx that guards life's riddle I.
 All hopes that triumph upward from the clod,
 All deep creative powers, to me belong.
 Alpha, Omega, in my bosom lie.
 Safe in my keeping have I hidden God.