

## THE COMIC STRIPS

SARAH D. LOWRIE

**I** HAD begun a philosophy of the comic strip for this magazine after this epigrammatic fashion: The popularity of that urge, "Say it with flowers," is all part of our tendency to make pictures of our thoughts, our inherent need for dramatizing life. We like to see our ideas in action. Hence the movies, and hence the comic strip, which is really as classic as a ballad or a frieze in a Greek temple, only to-day it comes on the back page of a newspaper instead of in stone or colored glass or worked into tapestry —

Here I stopped typewriting and went down town to see Watkins, the chief of a syndicating bureau investing fortunes in comic strips.

"What's the great idea of the comic strip, anyway, Watkins?" I asked. Without replying he filled my arms full of bundles of syndicated stuff for newspapers past, present, and yet to be, and bade me delve. I delved; and I delved without progress because I did not know which came first among all the funnies, or how, except theoretically, they should be sorted, or why Gumps came after Buster Browns, why Clarence the Cop had stopped and Hairbreadth Harry had gone on. I groaned so loudly over the chaos that out popped E. J. Parker, the official in charge of all the comic strips in that office, and offered me help.

"What can't you find?" he asked.

I should have liked to be philosophic again, but philosophy must be seen and not heard in newspaper offices, so I only repeated my question, which Watkins had left unanswered.

"What do you think is the great idea of the comic strip?"

Now E. J. Parker can roll as smoothly into a business idea as a billiard ball into a green pocket and I could see his mind working to a dollars-and-cents answer; but I swerved him by holding up



Skippy, by Percy Crosby

Courtesy, Central Press Association

the two nearest samples of his wares. One was a German "funny" of the vintage of 1890, I judge, and the other was Harold Teen imbibing a chocolate sundae with the young lady of his choice.

"What is the difference between 'em, you mean?" was his astute question.

"What's the idea?" I persisted doggedly.

"Well, as I see it, one was a practical joke, and the other — well, the other is Main Street!" he said, fingering the two meditatively. "The Germans liked practical jokes, everything was a laugh on the other fellow. We like to laugh at ourselves! I guess that's the idea, isn't it?"

He pulled out a cut at random — which happened to be one of Harold West in a business suit — and held up to it another of Harold West done of himself by himself, as he drew his Main Street self.

"'Nough said, eh?" chuckled E. J. Parker and popped back into his office.

Since that brief interview I have listened to many experts on the comics of to-day and of yesterday, and I have learned a great deal about the dollars-and-cents value of the output, but somehow E. J. Parker's explanation and elucidation stick. Partly because his logic is so simple and partly because I find the funnies themselves fall into line to prove it true.

The great idea once was laughing at others. And now it is laughing at ourselves. Germany gave us the notion, but we changed the theme.

The practical joke certainly did not begin in Germany. It probably began in the Garden of Eden and had a very slap-stick performer in Jacob when he got off things on his father-in-law Laban, some unknown centuries later. But if it was used to adorn a tale in Hebrew literature it was made always to point a moral in the German comic strip of the 1840's when the Munich artists in black and white followed the lead of Wilhelm Busch and showed little boys how they could play Max and Moritz tricks on their elders and always get a laugh out of the audience, even though in the natural course of events they also came to a very bad end themselves.

Of course the lure for adults — who eagerly placed these snares in the pathway of the innocent young, even to the extent of translating the German jingles into American rimes in order to make sure that no audacity of mischief of those terrible boys

would be lost on their own offspring — was the clever drawing, far cleverer in some ways than those of to-day.

That the practical joke phase lasted on and on successfully, these two comics of the nineties are proof. That they had almost the meticulous beauty of detail of fine etchings, even these little waifs and strays of nearly forty years ago triumphantly reveal.

The French were milder and more subtle in their manner of tickling the ribs of their children, but the joke was still a practical one — that is, the laugh of the younger on the adult. For Munich youngsters proudly possessed of the yearly *Bilderbogen*, this joke on a bird house and on a parent would scarcely raise a titter, and for an American child no incentive to emulation.

That the funnies of the 1840's or even those of the nineties are becoming museum pieces rather than nursery classics, one observes with interest since Joseph Popp's exhibition at the Technical Institute in Munich in April of 1924, when the comic strips and the comic pages of Carl Spitweg, Moritz Sulwind, Ferdinand Pocci, and Wilhelm Dietz — all successors or coadjutors of Wilhelm Busch — were hung on the line and attracted crowds of present-day as well as reminiscent enthusiasts.

Undoubtedly, when we have worn out our Main Street jokes and all our great initiators have left their laurels as well as their fortunes behind them, we too may hold an exhibition of our own funnies, and Bud Fisher and Sidney Smith, George McManus, Frank King, H. I. Tuthill, Gene Byrnes, Charles Voight, Billy De Beck, Dick Outcault, R. Dirks, Knerr, Don Herold, A. E. Hayward, Thornton Fisher, C. W. Kahles, and all the rest of the Daily and Weekly Dozeners will hold the fort as the great masters of the Main Street Period, as the Munich School contributed the high priests of the Practical Joke Era.

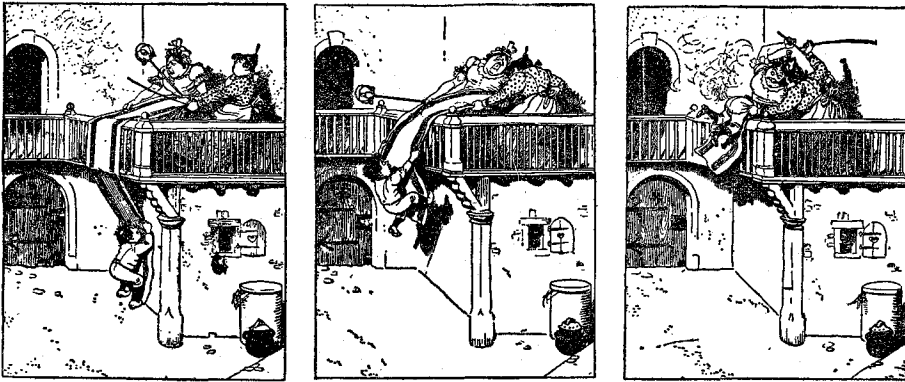
Not that the American break in the sequence of bad boys was immediate. The Yellow Kid and the Katzenjammer Kids and the Captain and the Kids, as well as Buster Brown, could have held their own with either the *Bilderbogen* boys or at times with Max and Moritz; and certainly in intention their antics were often planned to annoy some Johnny Look-in-the-Air of a grown-up; but if one is to judge by the comic strips which commanded the highest prices ten years ago, the tide of the practical joke has long since ebbed. Rather we respond to the artist who sees himself and ourselves as Harold West does.

Of course in the case of Hairbreadth Harry, Kahles combines

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characters was a kid with big ears and funny toes wearing a yellow dress. New York went wild over the Yellow Kid. Outcault put him in the spotlight and the comic craze that has swept the country and has extended all around the world was thus put in motion.

Perhaps Richard Outcault's Yellow Kid was also allowed gradually to subside for much the same reason as Clarence — it raised a protest from mothers and preachers. For though that big-eared moron was the progenitor of American comics in color, as Kahles notes, he was not approved by those who were dubious about the moral effect of the Sunday color supplement. Not that Kahles says in his recollections of those days anything about parental disapproval of the Yellow Kid; but he has a pregnant paragraph on his own experience of what the American public permits in the way of fun for children, or indeed for adults. He remarked to the reporter who was interviewing him, "The most serious thing about comics is not what to do, but what not to do. I remember once I had Rudolph, the villain, inciting some small boys to burn down a schoolhouse. The next day came a score of stiff letters of protest from teachers. Then one time I cartooned Adam and Eve and was admonished by mail from some persons of a



19th Century German comics by A. Honauly



highly religious character that no characters from the Bible ought to appear in a Sunday comic cartoon. None ever have appeared from my pen since, nor have any more schoolhouses been burned down."

When one recollects the jokes on schoolmasters of the *Bilderbogen* series this restraint seems almost miraculous. Certainly it shows how times had changed and the point of view had shifted even twenty years ago. There was nothing sudden however in the transition, for Outcault took the Yellow Kid to the Sunday edition of the *New York Journal* and gradually worked out of the abnormal impishness of that creation into the "Buster Brown" and "Pore Lil' Pete Mose" series for the *Herald* and the *Denver Post*. Meantime, George McManus worked a more adult field in "The Newly Weds," and "Panhandle Pete." While Herriman took to the pet realm with his "Krazy Kat," and Bud Fisher to vaudeville epics with "Mutt and Jeff," Carl Schultz anticipated the "Bringing Up Father" joke by his "Foxy Grandpa" idea. The public was very quick in catching on to the lead that Hearst and Bennett had given with their color sections; and as one newspaper after another felt the demand and tried to fill it, there was considerable rivalry as to what newly established syndicate should annex the popular artists.

Many of the artists achieved popularity more by luck, at the outset, than by special training, as the following ingenuous confession of the creator of Hairbreadth indicates:

I went on the *World* when I was 20 as a regular assignment artist. One day they wanted a comic and I was the only man in the office. They told me to get to work and start one. So I started Clarence the Cop, which in the early years had only two contemporaries, the Katzenjammer Kids, by Dirks, and Happy Hooligan. In 1906 I heard that the *Philadelphia Press* wanted a comic serial. I was then drawing Clarence the Cop, The Teasers, Mr. Butt-in and Billy Bounce, but I was willing to take on another, so I went to Philadelphia and saw the managing editor. Then was born that character which is still alive to-day, Hairbreadth Harry.

Hairbreadth Harry, who has discovered the secret of perpetual youth, apparently, is now featured by the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* Syndicate, and after twenty years of championship of the fair Belinda is still going strong against the ever baffled Rudolph.

This transference from one newspaper to another, which seems possible for some popular artists and not for others, all depends on the kind of contract a man makes with his particular syndicate. Dirks, who invented the Katzenjammer Kids in the Hearst

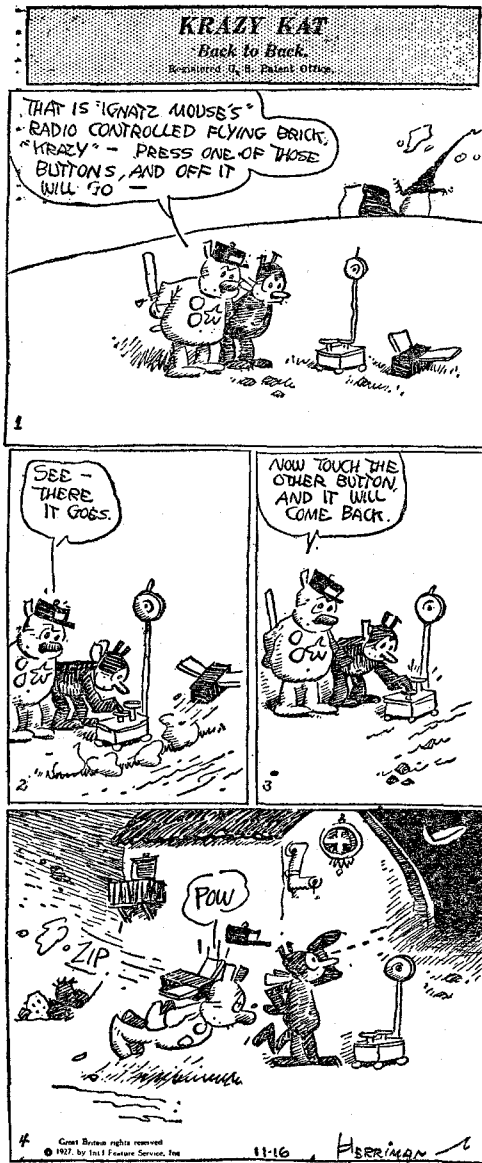
papers, could not transfer his child to the New York *World* but had to leave him behind for Knerr to stepfather, while he adopted another set of characters with a fondly reminiscent sound to the name — “The Captain and the Kids.” The “Mutt and Jeff” of Bud Fisher probably have a still higher earning capacity for Fisher’s syndicate agents, the Bell Syndicate of New York; while the Chicago *Tribune* is said to have paid Sidney Smith \$1,300,000 for the Gumps and others, with a Rolls-Royce thrown in. The International Feature Syndicate of Chicago owns “Bringing Up Father” perhaps as much as George McManus does, and Frank King’s “Gasolene Alley” provides a dividend stock for the Chicago *Tribune* as well as for the man who thought of Uncle Walt and Skee-zics and Doc and Mrs. Blossom and Black Rachel and all the rest of the folk in Walt’s world. I got a sort of mild eye-opener as to what these dividends for artists and for syndicates amount to, from the manager of a New York paper in the course of a casual conversation on the value of publicity versus advertising.

For instance, the amount agreed upon between Crawford the manager of the Chicago *Tribune* Syndicate and the creator of Andy Gump and Uncle Bim, not to speak of little Chester and the hired girl, was undoubtedly a good thing in advertising, but as publicity the Rolls-Royce was even better; since it got more attention for the Chicago *Tribune* from a general public that “falls” for publicity and does not always stop to value advertising property.

The newspapers which own the output of a comic strip artist of course calculate on getting their money back with interest from reselling the strips to other papers. They must also get enough advertisement out of the strips to pay for the loss of the space which would otherwise be given over to highly paid advertisements of other companies the year round. So it pays the great city dailies to own their comics, or at least most of them. The rental of the notable ones comes to between one hundred dollars and two hundred fifty dollars a week for each six strips, a yearly rental of from forty thousand dollars to fifty thousand dollars on comic strips, or even more.

Some artists sign contracts for as long as ten years. Sidney Smith’s, for instance, is said to run for ten years at one hundred and eighty thousand dollars a year. No wonder Andy Gump thinks in billions; and Uncle Bim’s proposal that he be his agent

## THE FORUM



Courtesy, International Feature Service, Inc.

for giving away several billions still appears feasible to his sanguine imagination. No wonder Hayward's stenog flapper has her salary very much on her mind. Money talks in the comic strip world and artists are good bargainers. The yearly earnings of all these men range between fifty thousand dollars to seventy-five thousand dollars and that includes such classics as Ketten's "Can You Beat It?" Jimmy Murphy's "Toots and Casper," Westover's "Tillie the Toiler," and Carl's "Harold Teen," as well as "Regler Fellers" of Gene Byrnes, "Petey" of Charles Voight, King's "Gasolene Alley," "Barney Google," and A. E. Hayward's "Somebody's Stenog," and little Mary and their employer, the nut manufacturer, and his son.

The last publicity expert who poured these figures and names into my already overstimulated imagination was, I could see, not in the least interested in the news

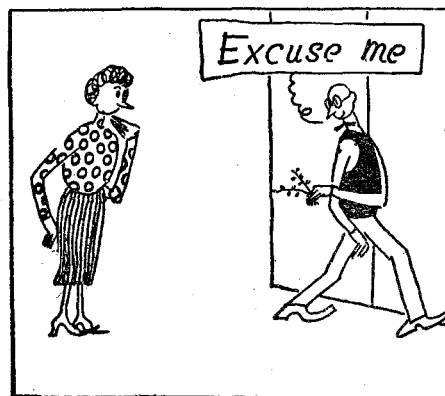
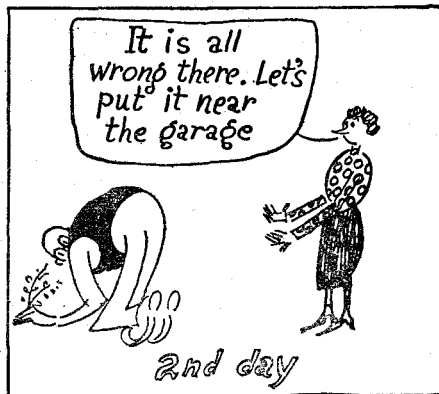
end of the business venture of a newspaper, least of all in the editorial page which, in his eyes, took up space without helping circulation. And I suddenly understood why there is such a wide gulf fixed between the news end of a paper and the publicity end — a gap that perhaps nothing spans but the comic strip.

That the comic strips hold their own with both the editor and the publicity man is proof, if one needs proof, that the public has



If Your Wife's A Fiend for Transplanting

By DON HEROLD



Courtesy, Don Herold

once more dictated to those gentlemen a policy that they must pursue or lose patronage.

Business, education, civilization, and sophistication all combined to give folklore its quietus. Ballads were encouraged only as literature, and improvisations like puppet shows were allowed no contemporary themes. Even the skits on passing events, such as those to which the Concross and Dixie minstrels gave their vogue, were cold-shouldered by theatrical purveyors of a modern vintage.

Then suddenly the public, which cannot long be fooled either about what it needs or what it wants, clamored for ballads and improvisations and puppet shows and minstrel take-off of itself in its everyday dress, on the Main Street that it has never left in spite of schools and pulpits, foreign culture and jazz. What it wanted, the artists, who are clairvoyant, were prompt to give; and the publicity men, who are buyers and sellers, saw a good market in cornering. And the editors, who have after all more humor than they are credited with, found it not so bad for their dignity as they had feared. So everyone is content, except the few outsiders who enjoy everyone's Main Street but their own and who go to Paris to avoid New York.



Courtesy, Chicago Tribune

# THE BIBLE TO-DAY

## *A Modern View of Inspiration*

FREDERICK KELLER STAMM

*DO modern critics in the theological schools hold that the Bible is an inspired book? If so, what do they say of inspiration? Is it like a ready-made garment banded down from above? Or is it a groping upward from below — something pieced together bit by patient bit? Such questions were daily put to the Editor while he was on Chautauqua circuit last summer, so he relayed them to Dr. Stamm who has answered them in this article. His reply shows that the modern view of inspiration accords with science.*

**I**N this article I am not endeavoring to support a "Bible Defense League" any more than I am anxious that a society be formed for the protection of the sun. The Bible needs no defense except that, like the sun, it prove itself a light to the path of all who walk in it. Says Dr. Henry Sloane Coffin, "The only defense the Bible needs, is to be read; and the only attack it dreads is to be left unread." There can be but one justification for setting forth on this subject; that the average man who reads may know how, in this age, he may get the meat from an old Book written in a bygone age and under totally different circumstances.

There are three different attitudes with which we must reckon. The first is typical of that large group which is disgusted with the kind of science many preachers hold to — a science which is quite obviously at variance with known facts. What are the preachers and the churches going to do with a layman who talks like that? The second attitude is typical of that other group which possesses a thinking mind and which has found within the covers of the Bible those great truths which authenticate themselves to the readers' hearts and minds. Under no circumstances will they ever be brought to accept the traditional view of the Bible and of religion. This group is ever growing and it is high time that the church take cognizance of it. The third attitude represents that unscientific and emotional type which is ruled by credulity rather than by faith, and which is terribly afraid to touch one jot or tittle of the Bible lest the whole foundation be destroyed and carry with it the whole superstructure of Christianity.

It is the function of scholars so to set forth their conclusions as to bring these various groups together and show them a more