

STEPHEN LEACOCK, HUMORIST

From *The Morning Post*, September 29
(TORY DAILY)

EVERY country has the humor it deserves; and the people of one nation can only apprehend, never comprehend, that of another nation. You become acutely conscious of this sad truth when you watch an Englishman trying to get a laugh out of an American friend by repeating a joke from *Punch*, or the latter's attempt to avenge himself by relating an American anecdote—he being blissfully ignorant that we loathe the anecdote-monger as much as the punster is loathed on the more opulent side of the Atlantic. For all that, now we have given up the pun (except in its subtler forms—*e. g.*, the saying of the Frenchman that he had had a long *tête-à-bête* with a stupid beast of a fellow), the Americans seem to be cultivating it in a surreptitious way. Especially in the writing of the single-sentence leaders which are so refreshing a feature of American journalism; as when it is suggested that 'John Bull wishes to be monarch of oil he surveys,' and that 'The world has ceased to quarrel over what is right and gone to scrapping over what is left.' On the other hand, American humor of the more obvious type is becoming mildly popular over here. Even the member of a highly respectable club, such as the Athenæum or Reform, will smile at Horatio Winslow's brief history of the decline and fall of a rich American family: 'Gold mine, gold spoon, gold cure.' So with the story of the deaf man who gave up whiskey, when his doctor said his deafness was the result of alcoholism, but afterward relapsed, explaining his reversion as follows: 'Nothing I heard when I could hear was as good as whiskey.' Prohibition

has given such jests the beauty of memorial; it is easier for a free and independent American to cry over them than to laugh at them. But the subtler triumphs of American humor are still above and beyond the ordinary Englishman, who cannot see anything funny in George Ade's fable in slang of breezy old Gus and the two mandolin-players (only their legs are shown in the illustration), and many another joyous masterpiece. The other day the writer of this dissertation quoted in conversation a certain lament on the death of the Arcoon of Swat, which is one of the most exhilarating things in the American language. 'What's got Swat?' began the poem, and, after a number of lines like that, struck into a tone of martial music:

Swats wha hae with Arcoon bled,
Swats wham Arcoon aften led
To death or victory.

Nobody laughed, but somebody did ask who and what the Arcoon of Swat was.

However, the two styles of humor are actually reconciled, so to speak, in the works of Stephen Leacock. Canada is a sort of half-way house in letters between U.K. and U.S.A., and it was to be expected that a Canadian humorist would arise who should discover the hilarious mean between American and English humor and so contrive to be all things to all festive folk (all save highbrows) on both sides of the Atlantic. Canada, though its literature has been impaired by literary criticism and rye whiskey, has raised a sound good-humorist from time to time. Indeed, Judge Haliburton, who invented

Sam Slick, the purveyor of wooden nutmegs and other 'notions,' might almost be hailed as the pioneer of all American humor of the Yankee type. In later decades the occasional humorist has appeared and become widely known — such were the late W. H. Drummond, whose 'Wreck of the Julie Plante,' is as well known in America as Hans Breitmann's famous 'Barty,' and Robert Service, whose first pieces, conscious parodies of Kipling, traveled on their own initiative from ocean to ocean long before they had been printed.

But Stephen Leacock is the first Canadian humorist to attain a fame comparable with Mark Twain's among the English-speaking peoples. It would be absurd, of course, to suggest a direct comparison with the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and the other great stories of Mississippi life which are part of the vast romance of transatlantic history. Moreover, Mark Twain is, *qua* humorist, in the category of Cervantes and Rabelais, for a *sæva indignatio* at all that is sham and inhuman, and an indefinable sense of world-sorrow forms the atmosphere of his slightest jest. Still, it was astonishing how soon Leacock's first experiments became known everywhere, in England as well as in America. His 'Boarding House Geometry' was quoted, within a year of its publication, in every journal that gives a column or two periodically of humorous excerpts. So with some of the tales in his *Literary Lapses* — e.g., that of the clerk with sixty dollars saved out of his salary who decides to start a banking account, insists on interviewing the President of the Bank, walks into the safe on his way out from the august presence, and draws it all out with his first check, leaving the building amid a chorus of inextinguishable laughter. His fantastical ideas are often in the nature of American hyperbole — but they are devel-

oped in English fashion as a rule, in a quiet and close-knit narrative which has none of the exuberance of the typical American humorist. In subsequent books he has made a delightful use of this unique gift, which even the superior person, disposed to prefer the Voltairian *gauloiserie* to all other brands, finds irresistible in unguarded moments. Thus, the writer has seen the most solemn of diplomatists, a born plenipotentiary in fact, suddenly overcome by uncontrollable laughter at his skit on the old-fashioned, well-informed article on foreign politics, in which the writer keeps the place-names Ballplatz, Wilhelm-strasse, Quai d'Orsay, and so forth, moving briskly through the air like a Cinquevalli's billiard balls. Memorable also was his satire on civilian war experts in a club — when one of them overwhelmed Germany with millions of Cossacks who needed no supplies whatsoever, the other at once countered the attack by producing a German organizer of victory so marvelously gifted that he could repel this attack without men or guns, for he just filled up the gaps in his line with pure organization. And his *Behind the Beyond* is the best parody of the problem play which ever has, or ever could be, written. And it is impossible to avoid laughing at his Kailyard novel, for example, which begins:

Sair maun ye greet, but hoot awa!
There's muckle yet, love is na' a'—
Nae more ye'll see, howe'er ye whine
The bonnie breekers of Auld Lang Syne!

The simple words rang out fresh and sweet upon the morning air.

It was Hannah of the Highlands. She was gathering lobsters in the burn that ran through the glen.

The scene about her was typically Highland. Wild hills rose on both sides of the burn to a height of seventy-five feet, covered with a dense Highland forest that stretched a hundred yards in either direc-

tion. At the foot of the burn a beautiful Scotch loch lay in the hollow of the hills.

If this fails to win a chuckle from a Scottish reader, he is yet bound to fall to some stray sentence later on, such as that which informs us that the Glen of Aucherlocherty has its sides covered with a dense growth of gorse, elderberry, egg-plants, and gilly-flower.

No doubt, Mr. Leacock owes something to the fact that he himself is an incarnation of the incongruous, being a Professor of Economics at McGill Uni-

versity, whose humor is taken more seriously than his political economy — more seriously, we repeat! He is about to embark on a lecturing tour in this country, and he is sure to make good, for he has the breezy eupeptic look and unfailing vitality of Mark Twain before he took to wearing an all-white suit. Many thousands will attend his lectures, and it should be possible, by attending a few of them, to have a fairly accurate idea as to whether his subject is humorous or economical, or both.

THE NEW WOMAN

BY SHEILA KAYE-SMITH AND G. K. CHESTERTON

[These two articles are selected from a series contributed to The Daily Telegraph, by a number of English writers. Miss Kaye-Smith, the author of the first article, is a novelist among whose books Green-Apple Harvest and Joanna Godden are most generally known.]

From *The Daily Telegraph*, September 13 and 21

(INDEPENDENT CONSERVATIVE)

I. AN OLD CLICHÉ

THAT phrase, 'The New Woman,' is the very oldest cliché — the original epigram. I cannot conceive it as of any later date than Adam's surprised exclamation at the sight of Eve, when all things were new, including himself. Now Adam is never anything but the Old Adam, where Eve is still New. As a matter of fact, I sometimes think that she is just as old as Adam, but, woman-like, she has mastered the problem of old age, and contrives to keep young as a subject of controversy. She was a topic in ancient Babylon, in ancient Rome, in the times of the Renaissance, in the times of Decadence

and Oscar Wilde (when people first discovered that the term 'new woman' was old), and now, in 1921, she is still the centre of discussion, and still apparently as new as ever.

No doubt, a terrible lot of nonsense is being talked about her, now as always. One particularly popular form of nonsense is to look upon her as a revolution. People talk as if the modern woman belonged to an entirely new order of things; they point back to the Victorian woman, with her crinoline and her Tennyson, and offer her as the type, *par excellence*, of womankind — her admirers even go so far as to call