

The Lineage of Eustace Tilley

BY BERNARD DEVOTO

"AN Amerikan luvz tew laff," Josh Billings says in a passage reprinted in Mr. Walter Blair's new anthology,* "but he don't luv tew make a bizzness ov it; he works, eats, and haw-haws on a canter." Josh was making a pretty profitable business of it in the *Century* and other magazines and especially on the lecture platform when he wrote the aphorism, but his observation was sound. American humor developed under the amateur spirit and began to decline—as a literary form, that is—when it was professionalized. In the same essay, Josh (whom Mr. Max Eastman recently described as the father of Imagism, which is pretty hard on King Solomon) made another observation that will bear repeating: "Americans love caustick things; they would prefer turpentine tew cologne-water, if they had tew drink either. So with their relish of humor; they must have it on the half-shell with cayenne."

Let us place on file some American state papers, and then return to our business in an orderly manner. Under date of October 24, 1862, the President writes to Gen. George B. McClellan, commanding the Army of the Potomac:

I have just read your dispatch about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues anything?

A. Lincoln.

A year later, the President sends a note to his Secretary of War:

I personally wish Jacob Freese, of New Jersey, to be appointed Colonel of a colored regiment, and this regardless of whether he can tell the exact shade of Julius Caesar's hair.

The Americans' fondness for haw-hawing on a canter may be observed in the fines assessed against it at Plymouth Plantation, and as soon as there are Englishmen on tour in the provinces it is made clear that the provincials were a people incurably addicted to telling sto-

ries. Before the end of the seventeenth century they must have forged an idiom, accent, and turn of thought as recognizably American as the last clause quoted from Lincoln, but for another century you will find little of it in what they wrote. The humor of Benjamin Franklin's formal writing is eighteenth-century London humor; that of his letters is more native, but it is only in his quoted

remarks that you get the pure thing. If he truly said that we must all hang together or we should hang separately, he was speaking classical American, though the classics were not yet written. Even more unmistakably, so was the first Yankee who remarked of Franklin's birth that though Ben's keel was laid on Nantucket, his mother went to Boston to launch him. The provincials had been talking that way for a long time, but it took them a good many more years to learn to write that way.

This oral humor was the compost in which our native literary humor sprouted—an indefinable but sharply individual humor with more poetry and more fantasy in it than most, with its own imagery, its own accent and intonation, its own patterns of thought. The sound of the human voice, in fact, was a direct conditioner of all American literature throughout its early stages: down to the middle of the nineteenth century the historian can read the printed page aright only if he keeps in mind the lectern, the lyceum, and the innumerable forms of American oratory.

Mr. Blair repeatedly stresses the oral foundations in his long introduction, which is the best and most comprehensive critical history of American humor yet written. He appears to have read all the humor there is, everything that has ever been written about it, and the full range of American literature on which it impinges. He is occasionally, in fact, too scholarly for my taste: in his enthusiasm for his subject he almost persuades himself that metaphor is a purely humorous

invention, and not all his exploration of sources impresses me. In any department of literature the source-hunt is usually dubious the moment it gets beyond fashions and conventions, and the basic situations and mechanisms of humor are so implicit in experience that you might as well turn to Aristophanes at once and do your further groping backward into the old stone age. But Mr. Blair is too intelligent and too learned to take his occasional ventures into scholarly technique very seriously. His study is historical, analytical, and critical. It brings its variegated and essentially chaotic subject into as much order as can be imposed on it. It contains fundamental judgments on American humor; and, unifying and extending much pioneering work that has been done in the last few years, it phrases principles that must hereafter be taken into account in all critical study of American literature at large.

Humor became a literary form in America, Mr. Blair finds, when writers began to utilize in print the delight in native character, native types, and native eccentricity that had so long fertilized our oral literature. Two types long matured in anecdote and folklore, the Yankee and the Frontiersman, suddenly found memorable celebration in print at about the same time, and the significant thing is that Major Jack Downing and Colonel David Crockett were figures of both fiction and political satire. Let us pass quickly over the latter, since I shall be writing about it at some length later on this year. It is one of our most important and has been one of our most continuous traditions, though Mr. Lewis Mumford once announced that there were only three American satires before

"The Theory of the Leisure Class" and that these three (one of them being "A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court")



The Jumping Frog:
redrawn from the
first edition.



Eustace Tilley
of The New Yorker.

Next  Week

LIMITATIONS OF MORALISTS

By ELMER DAVIS

LINCOLN'S RISE TO POWER

By WILLIAM E. BARRINGER

Reviewed by Allan Nevins

* *NATIVE AMERICAN HUMOR (1800-1900)*. Edited, with an introduction, by Walter Blair. New York: The American Book Company, 1937. \$3.

were pretty weak and footless. Our literature would be immeasurably poorer without the distinguished line that begins with Jack Downing and moves through Simon Suggs and Hosea Biglow to Mr. Dooley and Alexander Throttlebottom. Realistic, disenchanted, completely devoid of reverence, that tradition has been an active force in our democracy, and that it has been watered down in recent years is one of the graver phenomena of the times. Mr. Blair admits Will Rogers to the company of our cracker-box commentators, but though the highest-paid of them all he fell miles behind Bill Arp and Petroleum V. Nasby, and light-years behind Mr. Dooley and Mark Twain.

It was in the realistic perception of native character that humor first invaded and then possessed the American novel. Here also it was a democratizing force. The earliest realism in our fiction is the intrusion of some low and usually rustic fellow as comedy relief to the gothic goings-on of the romantic leads. He is condescended to but he is drawn with a sharp eye to truth. The heroes tend to come from Mrs. Radcliffe and the heroines, as like as not, are from Bernardin de St. Pierre, but Nimrod Wildfire is from the life. Nimrod was born in the newspaper humor of the thirties and forties, and this rested squarely on the anecdotal humor, the insatiable yarning of the natives. It took him less than twenty years to capture fiction, he has never relinquished his domination, he has not been condescended to, and the main current of American fiction has been realistic primarily because our humorists made it so.

The job was done by a group most of whom lived on and wrote about the southwestern frontier. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, George W. Harris, Johnson J. Hooper, William Tappan Thompson, and Joseph G. Baldwin were the best of the group, which numbers several dozen principal names. Their importance in our

literary history had been singularly neglected until recent years. They were humorists, they were even amateur humorists, but they created American realism. Mr. Blair argues persuasively that they, with their Yankee colleagues, created our regionalism as well, and it is certainly true that the path leads straight from them to the "local color" school of a later generation, and past that to the more self-conscious theorists of today. They gave our fiction, if not its first localities, then certainly its first living communities. But, what is most important, they were the first American writers to make fiction out of the life immediately about them. They enormously enjoyed it and they were shrewd men, men with a gift not only for dramatic story-telling but for style as well. Much of what they wrote is dull now, of course, but it is astonishing how much more is far from dull. Much of Longstreet, much of Hooper and Thompson, and rather more of Harris will last indefinitely. One of Longstreet's stories (which, to be sure, he picked up from an elder friend) was good enough to serve Thomas Hardy's uses, and at least once Hooper beat Mark Twain at Mark's best game.

Mark Twain is, of course, the culmination of one part of this humor. "Huckleberry Finn" is a masterpiece of American fiction precisely as it brings the moods and materials and methods of this humor to expression on the level of genius. Other strains went on to create the local color writing of the eighties and nineties and still others to beget Br'er Rabbit. Like Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris is a phenomenon of southwestern humor. That area of fantasy, which includes not only such mythology as Harris practised but the tall talk and the tall tales as well, is native to our humor but has lain fallow for a long time. There are hints of it in Faulkner, Andrew Lytle touched it briefly but memorably in "The Long Night,"



SIMON SUGGS:
Ancestor of Throttlebottom.

Roark Bradford and occasionally other Southern novelists glance at it, but mostly it has reverted to its original condition. Give an accomplished Southerner a hooker of corn and the center of the stage and you soon learn that the stories are still there, waiting for literature to overtake them again and be enriched.

This area of our humor has been too little studied and will repay further investigation. It is most important, however, to study the images and intonations of our native humor. Everything that can be said about its mechanisms and devices has been said, and our gain has not been inordinate. But if it is really desirable to isolate the essential American qualities, the most promising approach is to examine the way the thing is said. Mr. Blair quotes a phrase of Mark Twain's, "The calm confidence of a Christian with four aces." No English reader would get the full beauty of the phrase and no Englishman who ever lived would, or could, have written it. It lifts the American pulse-beat because it is a perfect marriage of meaning, rhythm, and expression flowering in a poetic image. In exactly the same way an American esthetics is gratified when Mr. Lincoln forestalls argument about his appointee's ignorance of military minutiae by dragging in Caesar's hair. When A. Ward writes to an editor, "My perlitical sentiments agree with yourn exactly. I know they do, becawz I never saw a man whoos didn't," the comment is international but the phraseology, which has nothing to do with the spelling but is intimately bound to the rhythm, is absolute American. The criticism of humor ought to devote itself to style, to the ring of the words in the ear, to the thought finding a native idiom.

I have remarked that the important Southwestern humorists were amateurs. They were lawyers, doctors, country edi-

(Continued on page 20)

Sonnet in Bitterness

By JOSEPHINE JOHNSON

LET the dark power strike! I shall not care—
I give my body gladly to the dust,
And if my spirit scatter on the air
So be it! Air holds stranger things in trust.
Tell me of none who mark the sparrow's fall—
What use to mark, and lift no hand to stay?
"Thy hairs are numbered." Numbered, that is all—
The children starve by thousands every day!
Only the earth is faithful, kind and true—
However the storms of heaven beat down upon her
She brings her increase forth in season due,
And gives to man, the spent and desperate runner,
All that he knows of beauty, peace and grace,
His one sure joy, his certain resting place!

To avoid confusion, the editors note that the author of the foregoing poem is not the Josephine Johnson who wrote "Now in November." The latter Miss Johnson, some of whose poems we have printed from time to time, always signs her verse "Josephine W. Johnson."

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Henry the Great

YOUNG HENRY OF NAVARRE. By Heinrich Mann. Translated by Eric Sutton. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 1937. \$3.

Reviewed by KATHARINE ANTHONY

HERE is a novel written by a man in exile. Composed in one country, copyrighted in another, and published in still another, Heinrich Mann's book is testimony that nothing can disturb his talent. The fine security of a soul which can work and create in such uprooted circumstances commands our admiration and wonder. Indeed it is doubtful whether he would have chosen to tell the story of Henry of Navarre at all had the conditions of his own life been different. In the troubled but conquering career of Henry he found a subject made to his hand.

Henry of Navarre like Elizabeth of England accomplished the seemingly impossible in thrusting the Spaniards out of his kingdom. These two rulers of little kingdoms scotched the ruler of the world. Heinrich Mann's life of Henry is a brilliant development of the theme that power which has grown too sure inevitably becomes stupid. The contest between the quick-witted but resourceless Henry and the powerful but dun-der-headed Spanish is one of the main threads of the story.

"Young Henry of Navarre" is gorgeous history. Sixteenth century France with all its luxury, poverty, cruelty, wars, dynasties, politics, is momentarily called back to life. It lives again in the form of the chief actors in the scene and in the pattern of cause and effect which inheres in human affairs. Catherine de Medici, with her plump little hands, her narrow active mind, and her suave, secret cruelties is unforgettably pictured for us. So is the fledgling King of Navarre, her prisoner for three years, who learned in the long duel of wits with her that which was to serve him well in the future. The obdurate Jeanne d'Albret, who brought up her royal son like a peasant boy, is envisaged as the forerunner of the bold Protestant leader. The horror of St. Bartholomew's Day reaches our emotions; but a lightning-flash of intellect also reaches our judgment, as we see in the horrible Day a profound political mistake. It comes as close to us as an error made yesterday in Congress. Similarly and with the same odious nearness, the Duke of Guise stands out as the Führer of the League which, composed of rabble and supported by Spanish gold, crushed the reigning kings and threatened to dismember France. The powerlessness of mere gold against a great idea was never more convincingly presented. No student of sixteenth century France, no student

of history in our own times, can fail to be enthralled by the author's lifelike handling of a heroic period.

The character of Henry of Navarre has always had a strong attraction for imaginative people. Catherine the Great kept his portrait hanging before her on the wall. Voltaire expended his best talent in a long heroic poem on Henry's life and deeds. Both had a personal sympathy with his position in the religious wars; and Catherine perhaps liked to reflect on the nature of one who was as unstable in love as she herself. But the drama of character which Henry presented for them as for everyone else was not confined to a couple of striking traits. He was one of the most highly organized

individuals in history. Here was a man who remained natural in the midst of a world of affectation and artificiality. The novelist shows this with a single swift stroke as he allows the kisses of the natural man to fall on the lacquered face of his wife. More complex was Henry's leadership of the two antagonistic factions of the French people. But again the novelist succeeds by the same economy of method. "My Huguenots are murdering my Catholics," Henry cries out with real anguish.

No one has ever penetrated the secret of his amazing character as thoroughly as Heinrich Mann has done in this book. It is a splendid novel, a fine history, and a glorious comment on life.

Katharine Anthony is the author of several historical biographies, among them lives of Catherine the Great, Queen Elizabeth, and Marie Antoinette.

Four Lives in Iowa

REMEMBERING LAUGHTER. By Wallace Stegner. Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1937. \$1.25.

Reviewed by PHIL STONG

THIS novel deals with the consciences of some intransigent Scotch moralists. The casual fertility of a rich Iowa farm and of the animals that live on it are too much for the unpractised virtue of two of the characters, but John Calvin, who had so woefully failed to prepare Alec and Elspeth for the temptations of the flesh, had wrought tragically better with the spirit. Alec's wife detects her husband and her sister in the preliminaries of a carnal conversation; there is no resource in any of them to solve the situation, or to dismiss it, and the three lives end in a bitter stalemate. A fourth life, that of Elspeth's inevitable son by Alec, supplies the conflict for the final, most important movement of the book. Before he dies Alec remembers laughter. It would be unreasonable to say much more of the plot of a book that can be read in two hours.

Mr. Stegner, who has not published any long fiction before this novelette,

has built a narrative which comes startlingly close to perfection. In many ways it will remind everyone who reads it of "Ethan Frome." It has the same quiet strength and simplicity in structure and style. The characterizations are not as mature or subtle as those in Mrs. Wharton's novelette but they are well-realized, and this story has dramatic relief from the tragic mood in Alec's tall tales and the opulence of the farm life.

There is no use to mention the assurance and calm competence that Mr. Stegner brings to his first book—it has to be read to be believed. The story is so beautifully fitted together that the author is able to tie up his whole thesis, résumé, catastrophe, and climax in a dozen lines at the bottom of page 143.

"Remembering Laughter" is the \$2500 winner of Little, Brown's novelette contest. Stegner is an Iowan, about thirty, entitled to be addressed as Doctor Stegner owing to a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. At present he is an instructor in English at the University of Utah.

He must be a good one.

Phil Stong is a journalist and novelist, author of "State Fair," "Buckskin Breeches," and other works of fiction.



FROM THE JACKET DESIGN OF "REMEMBERING LAUGHTER"