

Smilemanship for the Gentleman

ense of Humour," by Stephen Potter (Henry Holt 271 pp. \$4), is the first volume in one: a definition of the elusive thing humor, a history of its development in the English language, and an anthology of notable examples—the work of a British practitioner about whom an enthusiastic cult is forming. Here it is reviewed by Professor Morris Bishop, editor of "A Treasury of British Humor."

Morris Bishop

STEPHEN POTTER is a gentlemanly wit. He is an Oxford man, a scholar with some valuable work on Coleridge to his credit. His club, the Athenaeum, Savile, Garrick, and Leander, may be confident, is the right club. (EDITOR'S NOTE: His clubs, according to the British "Who's Who," are the Athenaeum, Savile, Garrick, and Leander.) His immortal studies on gamesmanship, lifemanship, one-manmanship are an insider's satires on the code of the gentleman-sportsman. And his sense of humour is a gentlemanly sense of humor, straightened, betraying itself by the flat tone of the twitching nostril, delighting in the dissonance, the significant-surd, the sudden revealing phrase. His new book, "Sense of Humour," begins with a brief and scholarly history of English humor, from "The Owl and the Nightingale" (1180), through Chaucer's baffling blend of jest and dead-pan whimsy, through the "climax of English humor" in Samuel "Erewhon" Butler and Bernard Shaw, and through its



—From "Sense of Humour."

ORDERED LITTLE GIRL: "Aren't you nearly as old now, Mummy?"—"The innumerable children who made their sweet remarks in the pages of *Punch* of the early Twenties were almost invariably upper-class."

decline, by the author's own modest admission, to Stephen Potter. He then examines, subtly and shrewdly, the baffling phenomenon itself. He defines "humour," in the modern meaning, as "the sense of something begetting a quietly analytical amusement—the ready ability to feel that amusement." Disregarding the fact that he defines his unknown, "humour," in the terms of another unknown, "amusement," we may well remark that his quietly analytical amusement expresses itself by the smile, not the laugh, and that it is a characteristic of the quietly analytical person, the cultivated literary type, the gentleman, in a word. His Sense of Humour is the property of the élite.

This is of course quite all right; the élite are entitled to their special kind of comedy. Indeed, every individual is entitled to his own kind of humor; the serious humorist knows perfectly well that his large generalizations proceed merely from what amuses him personally. (I could say "extrapolation" here were it not that extrapolation seems to me a very funny word. Private sense of humor.) The reader should be informed in advance of the kind of humor his guide regards as Humour. Most of Mr. Potter's book, more than two hundred pages, consists of selections in illustration of his theme; it is an anthology of things that have amused Mr. Potter. As he is a very urbane, highly cultivated, and whimsical person, those of you who share his qualities will be equally amused. But those who do not share his qualities will find his choices idiosyncratic. They are very literary, betraying a special delight in verbalism, in strange puns, in parody. Here are scenes from Huxley's "Point Counterpoint," sedate middle-class idiocies from Butler's "The Way of All Flesh" and Trollope's "Barchester Towers," bucolic denseness from Thomas Hardy. All these selections are low in key; they seldom provoke the gape-jawed guffaw. Many of them, in fact, seem hardly humorous at all, in the usual sense; they are curiosa on human behavior.

Mr. Potter quotes, under the heading of "Unconscious Humour," from his Car Instruction Book: "If adjustment of the opening is required, turn engine until contact arm heel



THE AUTHOR: Stephen Potter, the Dalai Lama of Potterdom, has, at fifty-five, won the eternal gratitude of thousands of Anglo-Saxons who without him might have been absolute plonks. Potter, a tall, thin, honest-looking Londoner, first handed down the commandments of Gamesmanship in 1948, and life hasn't been as virtuous since. For only \$2.75 men, women, and precocious children can take instruction in, say, "The Art of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating."

However, for ordinary mortals to become fully matriculated Gamesmen and reap *mirabilia* there are a number of prerequisites, none of them essential: good academic family, good upbringing, good schools, all of which Potter himself enjoyed and which he sketched Gamesmanly the other day at the Savile Club in London. Born, 1900; attended Oxford, early 1920s; married Mary Attenborough, who has since become a well-known British painter, in 1927; taught and wrote till the mid-Thirties; wrote from then on. His books include a novel in 1928, a study of D. H. Lawrence in 1930, and the "Nonesuch Coleridge" a few years later. Around 1935 he joined the BBC to write humour. By a spectacular stroke of luck England was hit by a fuel crisis in 1947 and everything stopped running, except Potter. He wrote "Gamesmanship" in five weeks. "I don't think this technique is widely known in the States," he said sadly, "but there are a few small but tremendously powerful *bunds* for which I have great hopes. I do not practise Gamesmanship myself in any form recognizable as such," the master continued. "My approach is to suggest, of course, that all this is a satire on human behavior—how *not* to behave. However, it is possible by a certain half-obtrusive method of not practising Gamesmanship at all to be remarkably hitting off, if not pulverizing. The counter to this, of course, is not to have the faintest idea who I am. There is a method—However, there is some super-Gamesmanship and super-Lifemanship I must keep to myself."

—BERNARD KALB.



FIG. 3 Clothesmanship: wrong clothes in which Miss E. Watson beat Mrs. de Greim in the Finals of the Waterloo Cup Croquet Tourney, 18th August 1902.

—From "Gamesmanship."

is on the point of a cam, slacken off Screw 'A' (nearest the contact breaker points) and turn Screw 'B' (between Screw 'A' and contact arm pivot) until the required gap of .018 ins. is obtained. Then tighten up Screw 'A'. A small quantity of Vaseline occasionally applied to the lobes of the cam will keep the wear at this point at a minimum." This passage seems so funny to Mr. Potter that, he says, he breaks down completely after reading a half dozen words. I see his point, but after all a cam is laughable only to those who do not know what a cam is. The laughter seems to me to proceed from the superiority of ignorance.

I AM afraid I am yielding to the critic's habit of criticizing. In fact, Mr. Potter's book is full of very amusing, very revealing, very novel bits. That marvelous exchange between Arnold Bennett and Hugh Walpole! Those wonderful morsels from Terence Rattigan, Harriette Wilson, Sir Harold Nicolson, and many others! Even Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

There, now, you are white with anger.

I knew it would be so.

You should not question a man too close

When he tells you he must go.

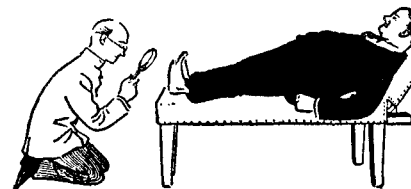
Tom Masson, who was editor of the old *Life*, used to get out a humorous annual: "Laughs of 1923," "Laughs of 1924," and so on. He had the inspiration of calling his annual "Laffs." He told me that the sales tripled.

I found "Sense of Humour" a delightful book. But you certainly could not substitute for its title the word Laffs.

Potterism: Its Ploys and Plonks

IT IS with three slim, calm, subversive volumes—all of them published within the space of half a decade, here at the midpoint of the twentieth century—that Stephen Potter, Oxon., *Punch*, BBC, has made his unmistakable dent on Western Civilization. The three books: "Gamesmanship, or The Art of Winning Games Without Actually Cheating" (Holt, 1948); "Lifemanship, or The Art of Getting Away with It Without Being an Absolute Plonk" (Holt, 1951); and "One-Upmanship" (Holt, 1952), this last being a sort of curriculum catalogue for a correspondence college of Gamesmanship, Lifemanship, and Gameslifemastery.

Potter's Underlying Theory may be defined somewhat as follows: Life can be rich, life can be meaningful—but only for the fellow who can always manage to keep the other fellow just unpleasantly off balance. Just off his game, one might say, especially if one were talking about the playing and winning of games; in short, of Gamesmanship. The point, however, being that the true Gamesman (or Lifeman) is never anything but scrupulously correct and courteous: that's in fact his whole secret, skill, and power. Take this situation: You are about to become involved in a game of golf, tennis, etc., with an opponent of clearly superior talents. It is to be an altogether friendly game, of course—yet of course (and as ever) you badly want to win. What to do? Just as a first step why not try the "Play-for-Fun" gambit? Particularly if your opponent has given you an opening by expressing a wish to play for some small, token stake; or a wish, on the other hand, *not* to do so. The beauty of the "Play-for-Fun" gambit is that, like many of Potter's gambits, it works either way. In Case A—opponent suggests wager—Potter's ploy is simplicity itself. (A *ploy* is any one individual stroke, move, or maneuver within some all-embracing gambit.) "Come," you blandly murmur, "let's just play for



—Illustrations from "One-Upmanship"

"M. D. Manship: a simple method of making a patient feel a fool. If he complains of earache after bathing examine his plantar surfaces."

the fun of the game." Result: You have made your rival think that you think he's not much better than athletic Con Man. Further result: reflexes are shot for the afternoon.

In Case B—you propose the wage; the final ploy is still more devastating.

LAYMAN (your opponent): Hal! a crown on it? No, I'm not particularly anxious to play for money. What is the point? If one starts worrying about the pennies . . .

GAMESMAN (yourself): Exactly! If money is important to you, much better not.

LAYMAN: But I meant—

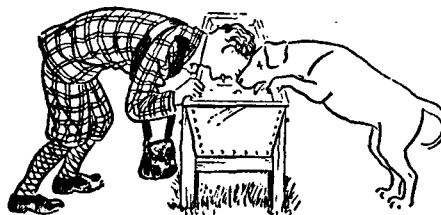
GAMESMAN: (friendly) Of course

WELL, that's Gamesmanship, or a very small part of it. Some of the other parts are these: The Pre-Game (including How to Start: The Flurry Winmanship (including When to Give Advice); Luncheonship; Losemanship Lost Game Play.

Lifemanship is merely Gamesmanship on a much larger scale or screen or canvas—the very canvas of Life itself. The literary life, for example, say you're an Eminent Author being called upon, at home, by a Young Interviewer. You'd like to throw the jitters into him right from the beginning. Enter Young Interviewer: "Ah," you say, urbanely, "sit yourself down." This one never fails, and is much for Writership; other important branches of Lifemanship are Conversationship (including Glaciatic and OK-Words); Actorship; Musical Plonking (Plonking is what you do when you have nothing whatsoever to say except something extremely stupid and obvious; this must always be uttered as roundly, as hollowly, as dogmatically as possible).

One-Upmanship is merely all of Gamesmanship multiplied by all of Lifemanship: the fullest flowering of the art of always keeping one up on everybody, everywhere, in every conceivable possible circumstance.

—JERRY TALLMER.



"Gatling-Fenn Developing Dogmanship to the Point of Absurdity."