

HAS AMERICA LOST ITS SENSE OF HUMOR?

An earlier generation of American thought a misspelled or misused word as funny as a pratfall. If error could be spun out into long chains of solecism—delivered by a recent immigrant, or an unenlightened ex-slave, or a hillbilly just down from the Ozarks—it was uproarious. Whether Hot and Cold Wars have transformed us into a nation of sober-sides is hard to say, but it's the rare modern American who will crack a smile at what Mr. Florance here presents as the humor of our grandfathers.

Petroleum V. Nasby, Mark Twain and Josh Billings.



—Bettmann.

By HOWARD FLORANCE

THE rite length tu cut oph a dog's tale has never yet bin diskovered, but it iz somewhere bak of his ears provided yu git the dog's consent."

That sort of writing went over big in this country 100 years ago. American wit and humor depended for a long time upon two tricks in writing: crude phonetic misspelling and the use of the wrong word. These devices brought fame and fortune to writers and often carried them onto the lecture platform. But what would we think of such humor now?

The quotation is from the writings of Henry Wheeler Shaw, who in 1860 began to call himself "Josh Billings." Josh was not the first of these whimsical characters, though he has come more solidly down through the years.

His immediate predecessor in popularity was "Artemus Ward," a raconteur created by Charles F. Browne in 1858. Shaw was a crackerbox philosopher or essayist; Browne made a pretense of being a news commentator.

Shaw, for example, wrote about homely things such as the mule, the hen, the goat. Browne took for his topics such then-current phenomena as woman suffrage, spiritualism, Mormonism; and Browne's Artemus Ward got quickly to the lecture platform from one end of the country to the other and even in London, while Josh Billings's originator stuck more closely to magazine writing and to books.

Both these humorists relied upon grotesque spelling. A little earlier was the reign of Benjamin Penhalow Shillaber, a printer's devil, compositor, journeyman printer who in

1847 created the character he called "Mrs. Partington." Shillaber's style rested upon the use of the wrong word rather than upon crazy spelling. Mrs. Partington was a delightful soul whose heart was far in advance of her grammar and her choice of words. She sent her husband off to church, "where the gospel is dispensed with." And on a visit to a lawyer she cautioned in advance against doing anything "by power of eternity."

Shillaber didn't invent that wrong-word style. He was close to seventy-five years behind Sheridan's "Mrs. Malaprop" in "The Rivals"; and Sheridan in turn came along 175 years after Shakespeare's "Dogberry" in "Much Ado About Nothing." "Our watch," Constable Dogberry proclaims, "have comprehended two auspicious persons." Later in the same scene he declares—as Mrs. Partington

or Mrs. Malaprop might have—that “comparisons are odorous.”

Dogberry, Mrs. Malaprop, Mrs. Partington all used the wrong word. Shakespeare and Sheridan were, of course, writing plays; they were manufacturing their humor for a listening audience. Artemus Ward and his followers, with their fantastic spelling, appealed to the eye rather than to the ear: “My naburs is mourn harf crazy.” There is nothing funny in that except the spelling. In spite of this, by his choice of topics Browne and his Artemus Ward became extremely popular as a lecturer. He went to Utah, for example, when cross-country travel was difficult, and there developed a lecture on Brigham Young and the Mormons. He went to London to tell Englishmen about the Mormons and to write home about the Prince of Wales, the Tower of London, the British Museum.

One may well suspect that Artemus Ward’s visits with Lincoln, Grant, Brigham Young, the Prince of Wales, and other celebrities of the day were quite as imaginary as the dialogue that ensued. Of his visit with the Prince of Wales, he wrote: “The time hevin arove fur me to take my departur, I sed: ‘Albert Edard, I must observe that you soot me. Yure a good feller. When you get to be King, try & be as good a man as yure muther has bin!’”

Outside the palace “the guard ceased holt of me in indigent cir-

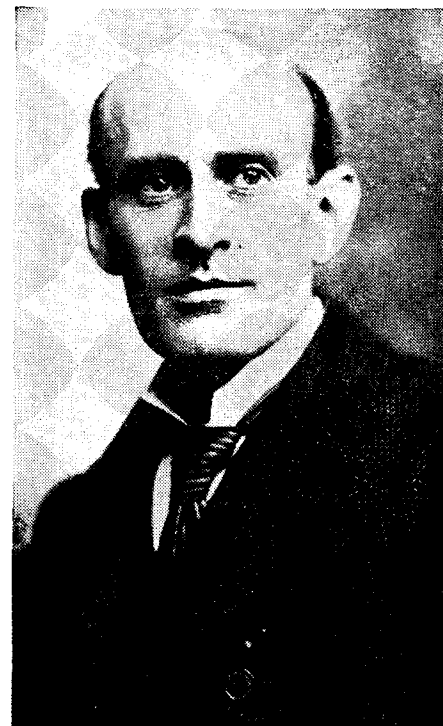
prise.” And the visitor pondered: “If the guard shoold happen to insert a baronet into my stummick it mite be onplesunt.” Here Artemus Ward belongs to the school founded by Dogberry and followed by Mrs. Malaprop and Mrs. Partington.

Artemus Ward was more personal—or more impudent—in his report of a visit to the home of Mormonism: “In a privit conversashun with Brigham I learnt that it takes six weeks to kiss his wives. He don’t du it only onct a yere, & sez it is wuss nor cleanin house. He don’t pretend to know his children, there is so many of um. About every child he meats calls him Par.”

AFTER leaving “the Profit,” Artemus Ward relates that he was “overtuk by a large krowd of femaile Mormonesses, ceasin me by the cote tales & several puttin thare arms round me in luvin style. ‘Wiltist thou not tarry here in the Promist Land?’ sed several of the meserabil critters. ‘Ile see you essenshally cussed be4 I wiltist!’ roared I.”

It was all convulsively humorous at the time, and the reading or listening audience well knew that the author was spoofing them utterly. It was permitted in those days to hold minorities up to ridicule.

Browne died at thirty-three, on his lecture trip to London. His mantle fell somewhat easily upon Henry W. Shaw. Helped by Browne, Shaw had



—Bettmann.

Eugene Field—“the last.”

already created the character still widely known as “Josh Billings.”

Josh was on safer ground. Instead of satirizing people and cults he directed his barbs at household pets and barnyard animals. For example:

“I have studdied cats clussly for years, and have found tha haint got affekshun, nor vartues ov any kind. If i was tew have mi choise between a cat and a striped snake, i would take the snake bekause i could git rid ov the snake bi letting him go. . . . Theze are mi views aboutt cats, rather hastily hove together, and if i haint said enuff agin them it iz onla bekause i lack the informashun.”

Or these bits from his essay on “The Goat”: “Their moral karakters are not polished, they had rather steal a rotten turnip out of a garbage-box than tew cum honestly bi a pek ov oats. They are alwus poor in the boddy but phatt in the stummick. The milk, whitch is extrakated from the female gote, iz excellent tew finish up yung ones on.”

One more quote from Josh Billings: “The mule is haf hoss and haf jack-ass, and then kums tu a full stop, natur diskovering her mistake.” This was double-barreled humor, that tickled the eye as well as the ear.

There was so much of this kind of humorous writing in the Civil War and postwar era that the reader became adept at decoding it. “That nite I perposed and she rejecktid my soot.” . . . “I wuz a Dimekrat becoz those in the speer in which I moved wuz.” . . .



—Bettmann.

Mr. Dooley: “Ye’re me Circulation. Ye’re Small, Hinnissy, but ye’re Silict.”

"My father know'd all my carakter-istics ez well ez tho he hed bin the friend uv my buzzum." These are samples from the writings of "Petroleum V. Nasby," creature of the pen of David R. Locke, whose satirical comments appeared in newspapers and books during the Reconstruction years.

Much later came Finley Peter Dunne and his "Mr. Dooley." Dunne was a Chicago newspaper editor and Mr. Dooley began to emit his sage observations on politics and social affairs during the Spanish-American War. He carried on the tradition of crazy spelling but only because his literary brainchild was the familiar Irish-American of that day. And in those very same years E. W. Townsend was putting the chatter of "Chimmie Fadden" into phonetic spelling to get across to the reader the vernacular of the Bowery.

To appreciate this piece of homely philosophy by Mr. Dooley, keep in mind the time it was written—the era of the carriage and the horseless carriage: "A rich man at spoort is a kind iv non-union laborer," said Mr. Dooley. "If 'tis fun to wurruk, why not do some rale wurruk? If 'tis spoort to run an autymobill, why not run a locymotive? If dhrivin' a horse and cart is a game, why not dhrive a delivery wagon? I s'pose th' raison a rich man can't undherstand why wages shud go higher is because th' rich can't see why annybody shud be paid fr' anything so amusin' as wurruk."

Eugene Field, columnist of the *Chicago Record* at the turn of the century, might be called the last of those who used phonetic spelling to get laughs; and his was only an occasional lapse. In his essay on "The Cyclopeedy" he wrote about a man who agreed to buy a set and take "one uv the volyumes ez often ez a new one wuz printed." For a year or two only "the fust volyume stood on a shelf in the old sekertary." When the owner looked for information about varieties of apples he read: "See Pomology" and when a baby arrived in his household he was instructed to "See Maternity." Both were volumes he wouldn't receive for years. The frustrated man was on his deathbed when the final volume was delivered to him. Again there was humor in the spelling as well as in the plot.

Rather difficult to read now, this humor of fifty and 100 years ago, but the folks loved it at the time. The nights were longer then, for there were few magazines to read, no radio to listen to, no television to watch. There was time to chuckle over each misspelled word.

THE MODEL, THE PRINCE, AND THE CIVILIZATION

Two Tales of Warning

By LOUIS J. HALLE

I CLAIM no originality for the two following tales. The source of the first, however, is unknown to me.

An Italian painter, having undertaken to paint the Last Supper, looked about his town for models. He found a youth with a face of rare spiritual nobility and painted him as Christ. He found a vigorous workman for Peter. He found a Doubting Thomas. In time he found models for all the other disciples as well, except only one. Nowhere could he find a Judas, and so the painting had to remain unfinished. But the painter never ceased his search and at last, many years later, he was rewarded. He found his Judas sitting at a table in a café—a face ravaged by indulgence, bad conscience in the eyes, a mouth that betrayed weakness. Tempting



this man with money, the painter brought him to his studio and set to work.

At the final sitting, as the painter was applying his finishing touches, the model surprised him by bursting into tears.

"You don't know me, do you?" the model asked.

"No," said the painter, "I don't."

"You never saw me before?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"I am the man," said the model, "who once sat for your Christ."

• • •

MY second story was told, I think, by H. G. Wells. I tell it here in my own way.

An Indian prince was robbed by death of the bride whom he loved more than life. Determined to erect a memorial that would adequately represent her loveliness and purity,

he had the best artist in his realm carve an alabaster tomb so exquisite that it became an object of pilgrimage from all over his principality. The prince visited the tomb every day, spending hours there in meditation. At the end of a year, however, he began to be conscious of some slight dissatisfaction. Wonderful as this work was, it still could not adequately express his loss. So he sent for the finest artists in India to come to his principality, and they raised over the tomb a pavilion that became the most famous monument in all India.

Five years now passed and the prince began to feel, again, that the beauty of the memorial still did not match the wonder of his own love. So this time he sent for the greatest artists and artisans in the world, and they built a mausoleum larger than any palace that ever had been in India. Its central chamber was a hall of marble so vast one hardly saw across it, so high its ceiling was lost in distance. In the course of the years this monument became one of the wonders of the wide world. The tourist traffic had to be organized, inns erected, guides furnished, and tickets sold.

Daily, now, the prince and his architect paced the galleries above its inner chamber, looking down into the hall where tourists came and went like ants across the marble floor. This, at last, seemed to the prince a memorial adequate to his royal feelings.

But not quite. As the years passed he became aware of something that troubled him still, some grain of imperfection yet remaining, some blemish which he could not at first identify. Pacing the high galleries one day, it suddenly came to him what this blemish was. He turned to his architect and pointed down to the original tomb, still standing in the middle of the marble floor like a satchel forgotten by some traveler. "Remove that thing!" he said.

• • •

A FAMOUS ornithologist came to the town in which I live to show his motion-pictures of birds in the wild,
(Continued on page 44)