

A NOTE ON O. HENRY

JEFF PETERS is a lineal descendant of Mrs. Malaprop; his use of words is even more humorously *mal à propos*. The introduction of malapropisms is a device much favoured, for obvious reasons, by the authors of humorous literature, and in skilful hands it can result in a high form of wit. In creating Jeff Peters, O. Henry, for example, surpassed Sheridan himself and gave us an even finer subtlety of wit.

It is to be noted, in passing, that when a malapropism is not obvious, it fails to be funny; it fails even to be remarked as a misuse and tends to become accepted in its erroneous or distorted sense. If a panegyrist is reported to have 'larded his subject with a nice derangement of epitaphs,' the substitution of words of common speech similar in sound but not in sense is sufficiently obvious to be amusing. But when the substitution is not recognized, ignorance eliminates the sense of the ridiculous. We are not, in short, amused. Thus it is not everyone who will appreciate the humour of 'fussily decency averni.'

It is curious to remark how frequently a sense of humour, and from another point of view even an appreciation of wit, is the result of a rather snobbish sense of superiority. When a man slips on a banana skin, the cream of the joke goes to his fellow-man who has not slipped but remains proudly upright. A sense of superiority, physical or mental, is a normal condition in the appreciation of humour. A provincial accent is most amusing to him who speaks according to the conventional and arbitrary canons of good diction. Macaronic verses are appreciated only by the intelligentsia. (There are some who even find food for humour in hearing a soft pronunciation of the guttural consonant in that word. On such small commons may humour thrive!)

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The above digression may perhaps be forgiven on the grounds that O. Henry is best known as a humorist and a wit. He is both superlatively, and it is not everyone who is capable of seizing the finer points of his subtlety. Yet none need go empty for all that; it is not only the master chess-player that enjoys *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. But he is not merely a wit. Like many another writer, he lightly veils by his literary skill a more serious purpose. It is the sugar coating that makes palatable a bitter pill—so palatable, indeed, that the pill may be swallowed without effect! He is the clown in the circus thrashing the villain to the hilarious satisfaction of the crowd, who do not pause to think that perhaps both the villainy and the thrashing are grim realities. His clowning is so exquisite that even the villain himself is perhaps deceived. In another sense, too, he is not merely a wit. This master of the short story strikes many a chord; love, courage, loyalty, tragedy, pathos—especially pathos, all these are the themes on which his genius works. But, grave or gay, there is often a deeper purpose within the story than the mere rousing of a transient emotion. For Dickens himself was not more deeply conscious of current social evils than was O. Henry. The murder is out. We propose the American story-teller as an earnest social reformer.

Jeff Peters is a character who, like Mrs. Malaprop, provides a feast of wit for many and of humour for all. He is typical of O. Henry's genius, yet typical only in the limited sense that Mrs. Gamp or the Night Watchman are typical of the many-sided genius of their creators. His creator has fashioned him well for his purpose. This mountebank, this silver-tongued rogue, this plausible cheat with a curious conscience, is none the less an attractive and somewhat lovable rascal—made so with deliberate genius. The roguery is not whitewashed—the author is too clever for that—

but by comparison with it, another class of uglier roguery is shown up in all the criminal blackness of its villainy. A quotation will form the best explanation, though the words are actually out of the mouth of Buck Skinner, Jeff's sometime partner in graft:

'You see before you two grafters from Graftersville, Grafter County, Arkansas We've grafted a dollar whenever we saw one that had a surplus look to it. But we never went after the simoleon in the toe of the sock under the loose brick in the corner of the kitchen hearth. There's an old saying you may have heard—"fussily decency averni"—which means its an easy slide from the street-faker's dry-goods box to a desk in Wall Street. We've took that slide, but we didn't know exactly what was at the bottom of it. Me and Pick ain't Wall Streeters like you know 'em. We never allowed to swindle sick old women and working girls and take nickels off the kids.' (*The Tempered Wind*).

This is the recurring burden of the Jeff Peters stories. Even though one may miss the occasional witty misuse of the classics and the malappropriation of epithets in which Jeff revels, the bitter irony of the comparison or the author's acute consciousness of the evil can scarcely pass anyone unremarked. Using the mountebank as his mouthpiece, he enunciates his view:

"There are two kinds of grafts," says Jeff, "that ought to be wiped out by law. I mean Wall Street speculation and burglary."

"Nearly everybody will agree with you as to one of them," said I with a laugh.

"Well, burglary ought to be wiped out too," said Jeff, and I wondered whether the laugh had been redundant.' (*The Man Higher Up*.)

There is no need to labour the point. O. Henry's books are worth a second or a third reading: who reads

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again let him understand, let him realise the author's cold, clear vision of naked truth that often enough lies clothed and hidden under the habiliments of snobbery and convention. 'Now you ought to be wise, but you ain't. You've got New York wiseness, which means that you judge a man by the outside of his clothes. That ain't right. You ought to look at the lining and seams and the button-holes.'

'New York wiseness' is not confined to New York, and there is no drought nowadays in 'watered stock.'

O. Henry sees with unusual clarity the possible and actual evils of high finance, and he sees not merely the one aspect of it exhibited in the brigands of Wall Street. He brings to the fore, for example, the evils resulting from the underpaying of shop girls. The following is from *An Unfinished Story* :

I dreamed that I was standing near a crowd of prosperous-looking spirits, and a policeman (angel) took me by the wing and asked if I belonged with them.

'Who are they?' I asked.

'Why,' said he, 'they are the men who hired working girls, and paid 'em five or six dollars a week to live on. Are you one of the bunch?'

'Not on your immortality,' said I. 'I'm only the fellow that set fire to an orphan asylum, and murdered a blind man for his pennies.'

There are a dozen stories to drive home the denunciation, and occasionally, as in the introduction to *The Third Ingredient*, the same theme is illustrated gratuitously and almost unnecessarily as far as the tale is concerned.

Another social abuse held up to scorn is the bribery and corruption alleged to exist sometimes amongst the U.S. police. It appears in various contexts. For example: 'Old Badville-near-Coney' (New York, of course) 'is the ideal burg for a refined piece of piracy if you can pay the bunco duty,' says Jeff. 'Imported

grafts come pretty high. The custom-house officers that look after it carry clubs, and it's hard to smuggle in even a bib-and-tucker swindle to work Brooklyn with unless you can pay the toll.' In *Past One at Rooney's* the sordid financial deal between the cop and the woman of the streets is far less palatable; but the influence of gang leaders over the arm of the law, stated baldly in this and in more than one other story, though possibly less unsavoury is far more submersive of civic rights and justice. He is not afraid to attack the highest functionaries of the state. 'What I wanted you to do is to go to Washington and dig out this appointment for me. I haven't no ideas of cultivation and intrigue. I'm a plain citizen, and I need the job. I've killed seven men; I've got nine children; I've been a good Republican ever since the first of May; I can't read nor write, and I see no reason why I ain't illegible for the office . . . I will give you preliminary \$1000 for drinks and bribes and carfare to Washington. If you land the job, I will pay you \$1000 more, cash down, and guarantee you impunity in boot-legging whiskey for twelve months.' (The leopard does not easily change his spots.)

It is to Jeff that the offer is made, and he accepts it. He says to his pal Andy: 'Now Andy, for the first time in our lives we've got to do a real dishonest act. Lobbying is something we've never been used to; but we've got to scandalise ourselves for Bill Humble's sake. In a straight and legitimate business, we could afford to introduce a little foul play and chicanery, but in a disorderly and heinous piece of malpractice like this, it seems to me that the straightforward and above-board way is best. I propose that we hand over \$500 of this money to the chairman of the National Campaign Committee, get a receipt, lay the receipt on the President's desk and tell him about Bill. The President is a man who would appreciate a

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candidate who went about getting office that way instead of pulling wires.'

'Andy agreed with me . . . but the hotel clerk told us that there was only one way to get an appointment in Washington, and that was through a lady lobbyist.' The whole story, *The Hand that Riles the World*, is illuminating.

One could proceed to point out his caustic exposure of the ghoulish land-sharks, or his ruthless condemnation of vile housing conditions and extortionate rents. But perhaps sufficient has been said to indicate O. Henry's consciousness of the social evils of his time and the methods of exposure adopted by him. He knew that noisome weeds like these flourish best in the dark, and that they wither and die in the light of day. As far as he was concerned there was no society to which he could appeal save to public opinion. Religion, as he knew it, was a graft. In the *Tale of a Tainted Tenner* there is a typical passage. The tale is told by a ten-dollar note :

'What is a church?' I asked.

'Oh, I forgot,' says the twenty, 'that I was talking to a tenner. Of course you don't know. You're too much to put into the contribution basket, and not enough to buy anything at a bazaar. A church is—a large building in which penwipers and tidies are sold at \$20 each.'

Even if our proposition is a true one, O. Henry (or William Sidney Porter, to give him his true name), may not perhaps have been completely effective as a social reformer. Americans should be able to judge whether any improvement in social condition is manifest since his time. (He died in 1910). For our part we believe that he would have been more effective as a reformer if he had not been so supremely effective as a story-teller.

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