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by Harold Ridley

On this fortieth anniversary of his death, Stephen Leacock, one of the finest humorists of this century, and "the best known Canadian of any kind, except perhaps Mary Pickford," according to Douglas Bush, deserves reassessment. Born in 1869 in Swansmore, Hampshire, England, and resettled with his family on a farm ("damndest place I ever saw") near Lake Simcoe, Ontario, at age six ("I decided to go with them," he was to say later), he survived the rigors of frontier life in a family of twelve children, all reared by a mother of breeding, hardihood, and humaneness, and deserted by a profligate, Micawber-like but insensitive father. Through his mother's encouragement and meagre family endowment, he attended Upper Canada College, a private secondary school in Toronto. The poor pay of educators always infuriated him. Years after receiving the doctorate, he wrote of his pay as a college professor: "The emolument is so high as to place me distinctly above the policemen, postmen, streetcar conductors, and other salaried officials of the neighborhood, while I am able to mix with the poorer of the businessmen of the city on terms of something like equality." He took his BA degree at the University of Toronto in 1891

where his contributions to the newspaper and literary journal led him to publish commercially. Eight years later, when he was thirty, he proposed marriage to Beatrix Hamilton, a girl he had met in Orillia, Ontario, where he spent the summers. They were married in August of 1900, and their near-perfect marriage ended in her tragic death by cancer twenty-five years later. She bore him one son, Stephen, ill from infancy with a rare disease which impeded growth, but brought to healthy and reasonably normal adulthood by the help of the best doctors and his father's tender care. Deeply sensitive to human frailty and human need, both inside and outside his circle of family and friends, he was profoundly affected, perhaps even embittered, by these events.

Just before marriage, Leacock so fell under the influence of Thorstein Veblen's recently published *The Theory of the Leisure Class* that he determined to study under Veblen at the University of Chicago where he received a Ph.D. in Political Economy in 1903. Despite this inexplicable connection, Leacock remained throughout his life a committed and vociferous conservative, consistently opposing socialism, castigating liberals with acid wit and pungent satire, and extolling the virtues

of the Empire. He carried his convictions into the classroom, particularly during his thirty-five year association with McGill University in Montreal, first as lecturer, then as professor, and finally as Chairman of the Department of Economics and Political Science. One of his students remarked, "His lectures were crowded. Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Malthus would come to life. He, before Winston Churchill, saved the British Empire every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at three o'clock in Room 20."

As to the Ph.D. degree itself, Leacock wrote, "The meaning of this degree is that the recipient of instruction is examined for the last time in his life, and is pronounced completely full. After this, no new ideas can be imparted to him." He took pride in it nonetheless, and when on a trip to Europe, having signed the register as Doctor Leacock, he was summoned by the Captain to "Have a look at the second stewardess's knee," he was "off like a shot." "But it was no use. Another fellow got there ahead of me. He was a Doctor of Divinity."

Leacock's best known and most widely used text, *Elements of Political Science* (1906), earned him more money than any of his books of humor. It was revised and reissued in 1921, again proving successful. He published widely and influentially in his professional disciplines, chiefly political science, but it was his humor that built his reputation.

Privately printed, Leacock's first humorous book, *Literary Lapses* (1910), proved so successful that John Lane of the prestigious Bodley Head, Ltd. of England purchased publication rights, thus establishing a long association with Leacock. A curious potpourri of sketches, *Literary Lapses* reflects many of the comic themes and devices which were to characterize Leacock's writing from that point on. "My Financial Career" establishes a standard type in Leacock's fictions, the little man bewildered by a world he can neither understand nor cope with (Charlie Chaplin later sought Leacock unsuccessfully to write a scenario for him) treated with a subtle blend of the ludicrous and the pathetic. Here a meek, shy, suspicious soul, persuaded to bank his life savings of fifty-six dollars, does so cautiously and furtively, only to be so intimidated by marble columns, the austere bank guards, the hollow-sounding vaulted floors, the teller's cage, and the condescending and formidable teller himself, that, upon departure, he immediately returns and withdraws the full amount. When the supercilious teller asks how he wants the money, he says secretly, "In fifties," "And the rest?" "In sixes." From then on, he keeps all his money "in silver dollars in a sock."

Literary Lapses anticipates other persistent themes as well: attitudes toward finances, public and private; spoofs of antiquities, aristocracy, the nouveau rich, supernaturalism, contemporary literature, poetry in general which he regarded as on the lowest literary scale; mild satire on the clergy, law, medicine, education, business, clubs and clubmen and women, phonies, and food faddists; appreciation of barbers for being as in Ring Lardner's sketches, small town communication centers. All through this first book, Leacock distinguishes sharply between rural and urban life, things as they are and as they should be, life as it was and as it is now, and what we have come to accept as permanent in our culture and what we may reasonably - or even unreasonably - anticipate in the future.

Leacock's interest in travel emerges here also. As he came to travel more and more widely, for business or pleasure, he broadened his perspectives while never losing sight of his origins and his fundamental loyalties. He was thus constantly learning, so it's not surprising that the topic of education itself should occur in some form in every book of humor he wrote. In "A Manual of Education," for instance, all major disciplines are dismissed summarily with truncated versions. Thus, "Botany is the art of plants. Plants are divided into trees, flowers, and vegetables. The true botanist knows a tree as soon as he sees it. He learns to distinguish it from a vegetable by merely putting his ear to it." Though he was trained in them himself, he even satirizes the classics. He delights in deflating the pretensions of those who quote vaingloriously and egotistically from the classics and who claim these works "made them what they are." In "Homer and Humbug" (*Behind the Beyond*, 1916), he insists that "some of these men would have been who they are no matter what they were." Later, in "Oxford As I See It" (*My Discovery of England*, 1922), he attributes to the tutorial system, where students gather in their tutor's digs discussing ideas amidst his befogging tobacco smoke, the development of genuine scholarship, since "men who have been systematically smoked at for four years turn into ripe scholars."

At the heart of Leacock's most amusing humor lie some of his deepest prejudices. For example, he believed that women in higher education should stay segregated at Bryn Mawr or Wellesley. "A girl in such a place as McGill, with men all about her, sits for four years as silent as a frog full of shot." Or, "I spent three years in the graduate school of Chicago, where coeducational girls were as thick as autumn leaves -- and some thicker." Another prejudice, this one perhaps not unfounded, involves the contrast between English and American

attitudes toward education. At Oxford, students work at their own pace, while in American universities professors are concerned with a student's "department," his "organizing ability and his hope of promotion to a soap factory." To the American professor, "a student of genius merely means . . . a student who gives no trouble, who passes all his 'tests,' and is present at all his recitations." Such a student, "if he can be trained to be a hustler and an advertiser, will undoubtedly 'make good'."

From: EASY WAYS TO SUCCESS

How To Make A Fortune In Real Estate

Select a piece of ground anywhere close to a large city, and lying in the direction in which the city is about to grow. Avoid land where the city is not going to grow. In buying the land, be careful to pay for it only a very small sum. Sometimes real estate of this sort is bought for a song; so you may, if you like, see what you can do by singing.

After buying your land, hold it for at least three days. It is this careful holding of the land which makes the money. After holding it three days, mark it out into squares and sell it for building apartments on. Sell it for an enormous price.

Then buy another piece of land, hold it for three days, and sell it.

Literary Lapses also reveals Leacock's lifelong childhood spirit, coupled with his childhood disappointments at Christmas when, as one child in a large family of limited means, he frequently received but one "practical" gift when he had anticipated otherwise. This preoccupation tends to confirm the "boy-man" thesis advanced by more than one Leacock critic. Donald Cameron claims that the essential Leacock is "a man whose bluff, relaxed man of the world facade concealed a frightened and reticent boy, brilliant enough to make his way in the world by pelting with laughter the very qualities of the world which made him uneasy." Thus the vacillation between sense and silliness in his work demonstrates the mingled clarity and confusion of his vision.

In "Hoodoo McFiggins' Christmas," a boy who has sacrificed to buy his father a box of cigars and his mother an imitation diamond brooch for Christmas, fails to receive his hoped-for puppy dog, watch-and-chain, toy pistol and caps, toy drum, and book -- "fairy tales or adventures." What was really in the mysterious packages left him disappointed but not undaunted, so he still determined to have fun "playing with his toys":

First he played with his toothbrush. He got a whole lot of water and brushed his teeth with it. This was huge. Then he played with his collars. He had no end of fun with them, taking them all out one by one and swearing at them, and then putting them back and swearing at the whole lot together.

The next toy was his pants. He had immense fun there, putting them on and taking them off again, and then trying to guess which side was which by merely looking at them.

After that he took his book and read some adventures called "Genesis" till breakfast.

After he kisses his mother and father, and sees his father smoking a cigar and his mother wearing her brooch proudly, he quietly determines "that next Christmas he will hang on to his money and take chances on what the angels bring."

Leacock's second book, *Nonsense Novels* (1912), is a series of parodies of popular types of fiction: among them the social novel, the detective story, the chivalric romance, the futuristic novel, the yarn of the sea, the tale of life on the old heavily mortgaged farm. "Gertrude the Governess," orphaned long before she was born, has for her education but the meagre resources of her aunt's library and music room: a piano; French, Italian, Russian, and Roumanian grammars; a theodolite; and a book on mining engineering. The day she finds she must seek gainful employment, her eye lights upon an advertisement for a governess with "a knowledge of French, Italian, Russian, Roumanian, Music, and Mining Engineering." Struck by the correlation, it takes Gertrude but half-an-hour to realize that she is admirably equipped for the task of educating "two golden-haired children" destined to inherit an immense fortune obtained from mining operations. All ends happily: one who has loved her long, a nobleman no less, becomes her husband against his father's, the Earl's, and mother's, the Countess's, objections:

Gertrude and Ronald were wed. Their happiness was complete. Need we say more? Yes, only this. The Earl was killed in the hunting-field a few days after. The Countess was struck by lightning. The two children fell down as well. Thus the happiness of Gertrude and Ronald was complete.

"Guido the Gimlet of Ghent" seeks the hand of Isolde; but for her love others have suffered:

Otto the Otter had cast himself into the sea. Conrad the Cocomat had hurled himself from the highest battlement of the castle head first into mud. Hugo the Helpless had hanged himself by the waistband to a hickory tree and had refused all efforts to dislodge him. For her sake Siegfried the Susceptible had swallowed sulphuric acid.

In Leacock's parody of the sentimental tale, John Enderby, about to lose the Old Homestead, tilted "the crock of buttermilk that stood beside him and drained a draught of the maddening liquid, till his brain glowed like the coals of the tamarack fire before him," and when his distraught wife urged him to read "the Good Book" instead, he "took from her hand the well-worn copy of *Euclid's Elements*" and read "the angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal, and whosoever shall produce the sides, lo, the same also shall be equal each unto each." Even Scottish national pride is punctured in "Hannah of the Highlands."

It was here in the glen that Bonnie Prince Charlie had lain and hidden after the defeat of Culloden. Almost in the same spot the great boulder still stands behind which the Bruce had lain hidden after Bannockburn; while behind a number of lesser stones the Covenanters had concealed themselves during the height of the Stuart persecution.

Parody depends heavily on the reader's familiarity with the original, but Leacock's parodies afford pleasure even to the uninitiated.

It was in *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* (1912), and *Arcadian Adventures With the Idle Rich* (1914), that Leacock realized most fully that transposition into humor of the tensions in his life and art: desire for wealth, yet contempt for those amply endowed with it and insensitive to its proper use; affection for individuals, but suspicion of their clumping together institutionally; divided loyalties between the satisfactions of domestic life and the demands of a public career; ambivalence toward professions and their practitioners, including his own. Never a novelist, he was nonetheless able in these books to sustain consistency of character, setting, situation, mood, and theme to produce remarkable overall integrity.

In *Sunshine Sketches*, the town called Mariposa provides the major linking device. Mariposa was a thinly fictionalized version of Orillia, a town which Leacock knew well. In his preface, Leacock disclaimed "writing about a real place and real people," claiming that Mariposa may be found "all the way from Lake Superior to the sea, with the same maple trees and the same churches and hotels." Similarly, he disavows actuality of character, though the citizenry of Orillia so disagreed that Leacock barely escaped libel actions. The barber of the town said repeatedly to indignant customers. "How in hell was I to know he would put these things in a book."

In the course of composing *Sunshine Sketches*, Leacock revealed not only his ambivalence about Orillia's inhabitants, a microcosm of Leacock's whole world, but he also exposed many of his own

From: A MANUAL OF
EDUCATION

Natural Science treats of motion and force. Many of its teachings remain as part of an educated man's permanent equipment in life.

Such are:

(a) The harder you shove a bicycle the faster it will go. This is, because of natural science.

(b) If you fall from a high tower, you fall quicker and quicker and quicker. A judicious selection of a tower will ensure any rate of speed.

(c) If you put your thumb in between two cogs it will go on and on, until the wheels are arrested by your suspenders. This is machinery.

(d) Electricity is of two kinds, positive and negative. The difference is, I presume, that one kind comes a little more expensive, but is more durable; the other is a cheaper thing, but the moths get into it.

predilections -- even prejudices -- about the manners and mores of his time. Moreover, by reading aloud sections of the book to friends and family, he discovered that rich potential for public speaking which he exploited fully in the years to come. Of his so-called "Empire" lectures, which took him all over the British Empire in 1907, he said, "When I state that these lectures were followed almost immediately by the Union of South Africa, the Banana Riots in Trinidad," and the Turko-Italian War, I think you can form some idea of their importance."

As to Orillia itself, Leacock built himself a summer home, "Old Brewery Bay," on the shores of Lake Couchiching near the town. There he relaxed from the rigors of college teaching and lecture tours.

Mariposa, the fictional town in *Sunshine Sketches*, slopes down from Lake Wissanotti, out of which flows the Ossawippi River. The frame for the story is Josiah Smith's hostelry which, at the beginning of the book, he is obligated to endow, because of a threatened closing, with French chef, "rat's cooler," and twenty-five cent gourmet meals, thus creating so strong a grass roots movements that he keeps his license without having to add the "girl room," whatever that was.

The humor of the book takes many different forms: plays on words, incongruity of various kinds, hyperbole, malapropisms, barely credible eccentricities, harmless deceptions, silly ambitions punctured by deflationary rhetoric, paradoxical figures, irony, sudden shifts in tone and diction, outright puns, and situations that show the

ineffectual puny creature man pitted against a jungle of frustrating circumstance, from which he is rescued by inexplicable quirks of fate. However, the fundamental comic effect is achieved by Leacock's firm conviction that the finest humor arises from "an attempt to see things as they really are and not as convention has led us to think they are," as well as by his view that "the very essence of good humor is that it must be without harm and without malice" even though "there is in all of us a certain vein of the old original demoniacal humor or joy in the misfortune of another which sticks to us like our original sin."

The frame story in *Sunshine Sketches* recounts Smith's surprising election as M.P. from Missinaba County. His opponent, Bagshaw the Liberal, demonstrates an acerbic rhetoric that is still characteristic of Canadian politics today. Promising gentility and restraint, he refers to Smith as a skunk, a common saloon-keeper, a horse thief, a "notable perjurer," and "the Blackest-hearted liar in Missinaba County."

Set like jewels within the frame are nine stories which demonstrate the full range of Leacock's comic ability. Jefferson Thorpe, barber and speculator, makes a fortune in silver only to lose it all by investing in bananas. He maintains his composure in failure as he had preserved his modesty in success, by planning to contribute most of his money to the indigent and the idiots of Missinaba County. Even his daughter Myra, back at her job as telephone operator instead of on the New York stage, says "that if there's one thing she hates, it's the stage, and she can't see how actresses put up with it." *The Mariposa Belle*, an imposing side-wheeler, but easily mistaken for the *Lusitania* in a certain light, sinks, as she always does, in six feet of water, the deepest part of Lake Wissanotti, during the "Marine Excursion of the Knights of Pythias." Mr. Pupkin, a lowly bank teller "with a face like a horse," wins the hand of Zena Pepperleigh, the Judge's daughter, when, in an attempt at suicide, he fires instead at an intruder in the bank, wounding him slightly and being wounded slightly in return. His assailant turns out to be the bank guard who had mistaken Pupkin for the thief, whereas in reality there was no thief, no robbery, but only two heroes. Dean Drone, the financially inept vicar, is spared resignation by a fortuitous fire (altruistically set by Josiah Smith for the \$100,000 insurance). The sun continues to shine in Mariposa, the better to illumine the follies of her inhabitants. If Robertson Davies is correct, "the people of Mariposa were a self-important, gullible reflection of mankind, at least from Leacock's angle of vision."

After *Sunshine Sketches* Leacock compiled *Behind the Beyond* (1913), the

first of the annual miscellanies. Here the parodies persist, the familiar human types abound, and the scathing commentaries upon almost everything appear. Two of the best pieces, both of which depend on the myth of the common man's vicissitudes and triumphs, are "With the Photographer" and "The Dentist and the Gas." In the former, a photographer so annoys his subject with fussiness over best angle, correct smile, and flattering retouching, that the victim finally revolts:

What I wanted is no longer done. Go on, then, with your brutal work. Take your negative . . . dip it in sulfide, bromide, oxhide, cowhide -- anything you like; remove the eyes, correct the mouth, adjust the face, restore the lips, reanimate the necktie, and reconstruct the waistcoat. Coat it with an inch of gloss, shade it, emboss it, gild it. . . then . . . keep it for yourself and your friends.

In the latter, an overcharged and irritated patient sends a bill to his dentist for \$400 (\$50 for mental agony, \$100 for gross lies in regard to the nothingness of gas, \$50 for putting him under gas, \$100, for "Brilliant ideas, occurred to me under gas and lost"). Donald Cameron calls *Behind the Beyond* one of Leacock's best and "most characteristic" books.

Arcadian Adventures with the Idle Rich, Leacock's fifth book, is the flip side of *Sunshine Sketches*, more satiric and exclusively urban. The Mausoleum Club, around which much of the action centers, is modeled on the posh Mount Royal Club of Montreal. Plutoria, supposedly a city in the United States, is really Montreal. The book castigates charlatanism, exposes secularized religious institutions tainted by big money, pillories corrupt politics, and thrashes go-getting in the guise of education. It demonstrates Leacock's deeply-held view that material means and business methods may be used to solve many human problems, but cannot be used with impunity to hold society together or to cement lasting spiritual bonds.

The mood of the book is struck in the opening pages where infant scions of financial empires are wheeled about the city: ". . . a little toddling princess in a rabbit suit who owns fifty distilleries in her own right"; ". . . a little hooded head that controls from its cradle an entire New Jersey corporation"; "a million dollars of preferred stock laughs merrily in recognition of a majority control going past in a go-cart drawn by an imported nurse." From birth to death, these Plutorians control lives they know nothing, care nothing, about. They ingratiate themselves with visiting nobility, they patronize ecclesiastics and academics alike, thus vitiating the potential of the institutions they represent; their wives find their jewels and fur wraps "deastralized" by

two "old criminals" who have "worked this same thing in four cities already, and both of them have done time, and lots of it." Even the fight for "clean government" is really staging for the entrepreneurs to "clean up" financially. The businesslike merging of St. Asaph's and St. Osoph's churches, the only truly topical note in the book, satirizes harshly an unholy alliance Leacock particularly deplored.

Those chapters dealing with Mr. Tomlinson, the "Wizard of Finance," illuminate Leacock's method and purpose, as well as the relation of his art to his life. The Wizard farmer whose gold strike has plummeted him into a fortune, tries diligently to fail. Completely out of his natural environment in a fancy expensive hotel, he endures stoically the torments of wealth and prestige: pitying his wife her agony as inept society matron; seeing his son Fred, a good, hardworking farm boy, become infected with the malaise of indolence and the curse of decadence; having his tacit ignorance interpreted by a host of manipulators as creative shrewdness; and being besieged on all sides by self-serving businessmen, politicians, lawyers, clergymen, and academicians. Among these is President Boomer of Plutoria College, who wants money to restructure the campus and revamp the faculty ("to dismiss everybody but himself and Dr. Boyster"), and who has already changed Plutoria College into a modern university where anyone can study anything. When Tomlinson's dream of financial failure is realized, he returns home with a happy wife and a reconstituted son.

The other story best illustrating Leacock's blend of satire and sentiment is that of the strange marriage of Mr. Peter Spillikins, a wealthy twenty-four year old, to a widow with four sons, the eldest but four years younger than Peter, who weds him for his money, then falls deeply in love with him. Peter is philanthropic, cares not one whit for his money intrinsically, and is not a schemer or manipulator. He thus earns a happy home, a dutiful wife, and four sons who love him, and, better yet, play his favorite game of billiards with him whenever he wants them to.

Clark Bissell considers *Arcadian Adventures* Leacock's finest book because it so skillfully pulls together those two divergent strains of his humor, the utterly ridiculous and the biting satiric. For Edmund Wilson, those polarities were outward manifestations of an inward and spiritual tension, a kind of tug-of-war between "slapdash buffooneries" and "Canadian Violence." Robertson Davies, however, moderating Wilson's extremism somewhat, claims that Leacock's inherent violence "springs from a tension in the

mind" typical of all serious humorists. "Leacock is violent," he says, "as Chaplin is violent; under the clowning works a vigorous turbulent spirit, whose mellowest productions leave always on the palate a hint of basic brimstone." Leacock's own favorite story involves a man who tells a physician of his insomnia, nervousness, unlocalized discomfort, and general despondency. The doctor says, "What you need is a lift of the spirit which will take you away from yourself and amuse you. Go see the clown Grimaldi. I saw him last night. You'll come away cured," whereupon the man replies "I am Grimaldi."

Stephen Leacock, a man of gusto, pride, and insecurity, constructed from his fears and his hopes, his triumphs and his defeats, his meanness and his magnanimity, his loves and his hatreds, a quality of humor that defies precise classification but commands affectionate recognition. Repeatedly, we see ourselves mirrored in his work because his insatiable curiosity and his courageous and perceptive articulation fix us in the amber of his sketches. Gelett Burgess, another humorist of considerable stature, put it well when he wrote, "Though I say it as shouldn't, it takes a fine scientific mind to write good nonsense, and Stephen Leacock has placed himself in the class of Edward Lear, Dodgson, Barrie, Oliver Herford and the author of Felix the Cat." One could hardly hope to be in better company.



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