
XI—A Sermon on College Humour

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(This exhortation was addressed to the infant college paper called "The Goblin" of Toronto. "The Goblin" followed my advice, and look at it now.)

I SHOULD like just for once to have the privilege of delivering a sermon. And I know no better opportunity for preaching it than to do so across the cradle of this infant *Goblin*, to those who are gathered at its christening.

As my text let me take the words that were once said in playful kindness by Charles the Second: "*Good jests ought to bite like lambs, not dogs; they should cut, not wound.*" I invite the editors of this publication to ponder deeply on the thought, and when they have a sanctum, to carve the words in oak below the chimney-piece.

The best of humour is always kindly. The worst and the cheapest is malicious. The one is

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arduous and the other facile. But, like the facile descent of Avernus, it leads only to destruction.

A college paper is under very peculiar temptations to indulge in the cheaper kind of comicality. In the first place, its writers and its readers are for the most part in that early and exuberant stage of life in which the boisterous assertion of one's own individuality is still only inadequately tempered by consideration for the feelings of others.

In the second place, it finds itself in an environment that lends itself to the purposes of easy ridicule. The professor stands ready as its victim.

The professor is a queer creature; of a type inviting the laughter of the unwise. His eye is turned in. He sees little of externals and values them hardly at all. Hence in point of costume and appearance he becomes an easy mark. He wears a muffler in April, not having noticed that the winter has gone by! He will put on a white felt hat without observing that it is the only one in town; and he may be seen with muffetees

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upon his wrists fifty years after the fashion of wearing them has passed away.

I can myself recall a learned man at the University of Chicago, who appeared daily during the summer quarter in an English morning coat with white flannel trousers and a little round straw hat with a blue and white ribbon on it, fit for a child to wear at the seaside. That man's own impression of his costume was that it was a sortewhat sporty and debonair combination, such as any man of taste might assume under the more torrid signs of the Zodiac.

As with dress, so with manner. The professor easily falls into little ways and mannerisms of his own. In the deference of the classroom they pass unchallenged and uncorrected. With the passage of the years they wear into his mind like ruts. One I have known who blew imaginary chalk dust off his sleeve at little intervals; one who turned incessantly a pencil up and down. One hitchès continuously at his tie; one smoothes with meaningless care the ribbons of his college gown.

As with his dress, so with the professor's

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speech. The little jest that he uttered in gay impromptu in his first year as a lecturer is with him still in his declining age. The happy phrase and the neat turn of thought are none the less neat and happy to him for all that he has turned them regularly once a year for thirty sessions. It is too late to bid them good-bye. In any case, perhaps the students, or perhaps some student, has not heard them ; and that were indeed a pity.

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto thirty years ago, the noblest of our instructors had said the words "*Hence accordingly*" at the commencement of such innumerable sentences that the words had been engraved by a college joker across the front of the lecturer's desk. They had been there so long that all memory of the original joker had been lost. Yet the good man had never seen them. Coming always into his classroom from the same quarter of the compass, he was still able after forty years to use the words "*Hence accordingly*" as a new and striking mode of thought. The applause which always greeted the phrase he attributed to our proper appreciation of the resounding

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period that had just been closed. He always bowed slightly at our applause and flushed a little with the pardonable vanity of age.

Having fun over a thing of that sort is as easy as killing a bird on the nest, and quite as cruel.

Can it be wondered, then, that every college paper that sets out to be "funny" turns loose upon the professoriate? It fastens upon the obvious idiosyncrasies of the instructors. It puts them in the pillory. It ridicules their speech. It lays bare in cruel print and mimic dialogue the little failings hitherto unconscious and unknown. And for the sake of a cheap and transitory laughter it often leaves a wound that rankles for a lifetime.

My young friends, who are to conduct this little *Goblin*, pause and beware.

For the essential thing is that such cheap forms of humour are not worth while. Even from the low plane of editorial advantages they are poor "copy." The appeal is too narrow. The amusement is too restricted; and the after-taste too bitter.

If the contents of a college paper are nothing

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more than college jokes upon the foibles of professors and fellow-students, the paper is not worth printing. Such matter had better be set forth with a gum machine upon a piece of foolscap and circulated surreptitiously round the benches of the classroom.

If the editors of *The Goblin* are wise, they will never encourage or accept contributions that consist of mere personal satire. If a student is as fat as the Fat Boy himself let him pass his four years unrecorded in the peace due to his weight. If a professor is as thin as a meridian of longitude let no number of *The Goblin* ever chronicle the fact.

At the end of every sermon there is, so far as I remember, a part of it that is called the benediction. It consists in invoking a blessing upon the hearers. This I do now. I should not have written in such premonitory criticism of *The Goblin* if I did not feel myself deeply interested in its fortunes. I think that a journal of this kind fills a great place in the life of a university. As a wholesome corrective of the pedantry and priggishness which is the reverse

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side of scholarship it has no equal. It can help to give to the outlook of its readers a better perspective. In the surroundings of your University and your province it has, I think, a peculiar part to play. You are in great need—I hope I say it in all gentleness—of the genial corrective of the humorous point of view. You live in an atmosphere somewhat overcharged with public morality. The virtue that surrounds you is passing—so it sometimes seems to more sinful outsiders—into austerity.

In other words, to put it briefly, you are in a bad way. Your undergraduates, if they are well advised, would migrate to the larger atmosphere and the more humane culture of McGill. But if they refuse to do that, I know nothing that will benefit them more than the publication of a journal such as yours is destined, I hope, to be.