

COMIC JOURNALISM.

I take it to be a matter generally admitted by all who have tried on the mask of comic journalism, that it is no velvet one, but rather jagged than otherwise of that iron visor behind which a certain mysterious character in history was compelled, for so many years, to put the best face he could upon circumstances. Great assiduity is a thing almost incompatible with humorous writing. The strain of always trying to be witty and epigrammatic on the surface, without losing grasp for a moment of the weightier considerations involved, is one against which few minds could contend successfully for long, continuous periods; and hence the desultory mode of working so generally characteristic of writers who make a specialty of this kind of literature. Contributors to comic papers may be divided into two classes—the brilliant ones, and the reliable ones; and it is very rare to find in one person a combination of the characteristics belonging to these respectively. Of all the writers with whom I have travelled, from time to time, along the highways and byways of comic literature, I have known but two or three really sparkling ones whose aid could be relied upon, to a certainty, for any given day or week. The electric sparks thrown out by some of them, when in full glow, seemed to fall back upon them in ashes, and another their too good part, is the very brilliant contributor—a bird difficult to catch and not always available when caught, seeing that, in nine cases out of ten, his habits are no more under his control than his moods. And herein lies one of the chief impediments to making a real success of a comic periodical. The reliable contributor, whose principal value lies in his punctuality, is usually what may be termed an even writer, seldom rising to the pitch of brilliancy, nor often sinking below the level of respectable burlesque; so that, however valuable he may be as a "stand-by," he is unequal, at his very best, to establish an unmistakable prestige for the paper that takes him for better or for worse, whichever of the two it may be. Were it only possible to treat these two types of contributors as the juggler does a couple of rabbits,—roll them both into one, and then divide them by dozens,—the thing would be complete. Then might the comic paper not always remind one of the famous "down-town" merchant described in the advertising columns of the "serious journals as the hero of "many sleepless nights," and the expectant watcher of the times might reasonably hope for the coming of a successful American "Punch," a thing so long to peto that it ought to be very good when it comes at last.

It has been frequently suggested, that the most feasible plan for the permanent establishment of a comic paper would be to engage all the world as leading contributor to it, and, if possible, all the world's wife and interesting family as well. There is a certain fascinating massiveness in this idea, it must be admitted; but—as the writer of one of a bushel of old letters now before me says, in reference to a prolix conundrum offered by him—"Will it wash?" To this reply, without hesitation, that it will not. There is no doubt that useful suggestions are sometimes forwarded to editors of comic papers from the outside world, but experience compels me to state that the hints for squibs, caricatures, and articles generally, whether political or social in their bearing, thus tendered, are, in the great majority of cases, utterly worthless and impracticable. I have somewhere read or heard of a story told by the late John Leech, who used to be occasionally favored with such hints from anonymous sources, and who once had a communication from a person desirous to map out his idea for a scorching political cartoon. The leading object in the picture was to be a railway train coming along at a smashing pace, freighted with certain political characters, and the artist was to draw another train rushing from the opposite direction, but "now mark you this well" not yet in sight! I will venture to assert that every person who has essayed the task of editing a comic paper has been pelted, from all quarters of the country, with scores, nay, hundreds, of suggestions equally impracticable with the above. Among the curiosities of this branch of literature which I received in other times and retained for future reference, many are of a strictly esoteric and personal character. "A Borderer"—particular salvage of civilization to which he belongs not decipherable on yestermornk—writes to say that it would be a good thing to extinguish the postmaster of his place, and, to further the abolition of that unhappy provincial, he encloses ten cents, with a copy of verses in which impeachment for having "robbed a trunk" is felicitously set to music by means of rhyme with the disagreeable epithet "skunk." Another person, apparently writing from a place of detention for adults of weak intellects, forwards a number of anagrams— one upon the name of Florence Nightingale, and another upon the name of General Lafayette. The same writer suggests that the distinguished persons upon whose names the editor would do well to immortalize himself anagrammatically. Kossuth figures among these, as likewise does a local citizen whose name is given as Pericles W. Beazley, and who, according to the suggester, is a personage so filling to the eyes of the world that a favorable twist upon his name would at least double the circulation of the paper in which it might appear. A poetical contributor favors the editor with a parody upon Hood's "Song of the Shirt," feelingly wrought out with a view of influencing the market value of a particular sewing machine, the name of the patentee of which is ingeniously stitched into the wonderful stuff. This troubadour modestly states that he does not look for any pecuniary recompense for his contribution, but he requests that it may be printed with his name to it, in full, and that twenty-four copies of the paper containing it may be forwarded to his address. Another bard sends in a little poem not devoid of merit, although by no means adapted for the requirements of a comic paper. It has an old familiar air about it, and constitutes with sage pundits reveals the fact that it originally appeared in a volume of poems published by a lady about seventy years ago. To secure copyright upon it, as well as to display his acquirements as a linguist, the sender has put the refrain of the song—English in the original—into the French tongue. Wholesale piracy of this kind is very commonly resorted to by persons aspiring to be contributors. Ideas for social caricatures come in copies, almost literally, from pictures to be found in old volumes of "Punch" and other humorous periodicals, so that it is necessary for the editor to be pretty thoroughly acquainted with what has been done in that branch of literature during past years. I can point out, in volumes that now lie upon my table, sundry scraps—sometimes of prose, but oftener of verse—which were frauds upon the editor, being slight variations of productions that had long pre-

viously appeared elsewhere as the work of writers more or less known to fame. One of our correspondents is apparently a well-brought-up young man, who disclaims the idea of saying the thing that is not. He sends a packet containing fifteen "poems" in manuscript, all of which he virtuously avows, have already appeared in the columns of the "Graphic Playmate," or a paper exulting in some such name. He has rewritten them, he says, and thinks they would make a great hit if published with illustrative woodcuts by the artist who does the grotesque headpieces "with such charming fancy." Then there is the lady correspondent from the fashionable watering-places, who begins her letter coaxingly with "Dear Sir—You who are supposed to know everything," etc. etc., and encloses a diagram for an elaborate caricature of a flirtation going on between the married Major A—and the Misses B—and C—, who are scandalizing the chaste bathers on the beach with their "goings-on." To secure attention, her ladyship also sends carte-de-visite likenesses of the obnoxious parties, with a request that the artist will be very true to them. A common and very terrible type of the aspiring contributor is the one who writes upon law paper, which, on being opened, conveys the impression of a five-act tragedy, but proves to be nothing worse than a serial tale of village life, couched in the kind of disrupted English usually attributed to Pennsylvania Dutchmen. Collateral to this person is the lady who sends in a batch of anecdotes about the negroes on her husband's plantation, all the funny bits of which have circulated for a quarter of a century among the artists in "bent neck." But it would occupy more space than I may appropriate for this article, to dilate upon the variety of distinct correspondents who seem to fancy that the fate of the comic paper addressed is absolutely dependent upon the acceptance of their contributions.

More difficult to deal with than these are the aspirants who call in person to see the editor, and bring their "fireworks" with them. Enter to that arbiter, for instance, an "awful swell," who has written a satire in seven cantos, and wants to read it now, at a sitting. He does not require compensation for his work, which he originally intended to publish in pamphlet form, but would rather see it in the columns of your brilliant and admirable paper. The editor politely shirks the reading, but begs that the manuscript may be left for his perusal. On dipping into it in the still watches of the ensuing night, and discovering its utter worthlessness, he returns it next morning, by mail, to the writer—"with thanks." In a week or so, enter once more the slashing satirist, irate, yet triumphant, for he has called to crush the editor by informing him how the rejected manuscript had since been received with roars of laughter and applause at "the club," before which august corporation it had been duly read and acted by the author on its being. The crushed editor shrugs his sides, of course; but, before he has half recovered his usual serenity of mind, a sail appears upon the threshold, a splendid three-decker in silk and gypure, followed in her fluted wake by a bark of lighter tonnage—a tender, in fact, if, to sustain the nautical metaphor, I may so term her. The stately craft introduces herself with a little speech, thickly studded with handsome compliments to the paper, "a subscriber to which," she says, "she has been from the first—would not be without it for the world," and a good deal more blandishment of the same electrotyped stamp. Now she presents the younger lady, who is her niece, and has developed a specialty for inventing funny things, and samples of which she has brought with her in an enamelled portfolio. The fair young humorist is really pretty. Sweet as nitroglycerine she is, but fraught with danger, like that agent, and ready to make havoc of the stony editorial heart. "Has she designs?" inquires the editor, with a desperate attempt to be witty in the face of danger. She has brought a few with her—fancies of the comic Valentine sort, consisting of groups of flowers very nicely painted on Bristol-board, with the petals converted by dots and dashes into grotesque human faces. But the point of each joke is dependent upon the color of the particular flower, the lines under one of vivid ultramarine hue, for instance, running thus:—

"Why lookest thou so blue, to-day?"
"O, I sleep, last night, I did." And the wind blew all my hair away.
And therefore I look blue!"

Herein the editor discerns a famous opening for escape, of which he is not slow to avail himself. He goes through the whole collection, thoughtfully passing the while the dice upon the wit, the fancy, the eccentricity, the ingenuity, and the many other subtle elements discerned by him in each conceit. "But they can be of no use to us, you know. We don't print our paper in colors, and more's the pity, since it debar us from making use of such charming original ideas as these. Chromo-lithography, my dear young lady—if you will allow me to say so much—is yet in its infancy; but there's a good time coming, and we may be happy yet. And, having thus disposed of the matter, the editor recommends his fair visitor to try her luck with an eminent manufacturer of toy-boxes, to whom he gives her a line of introduction written upon the perfumed official note-paper.

The fact is, that at no one time, nor in any country, do there ever exist more than a very few writers and artists capable of stamping a comic paper with wit and humor of the sharpest and yet most refined quality. Thackeray, Gilbert and Beckett, Douglas Jerrold, and others whom it would be needless to name here, have not been equalled by later members of the "Punch" staff—neither has John Leech's place been yet acceptably filled. Of artists, more especially, the remark made is true. I have at hand a letter received years ago from a humorous *littérateur* then of much mark in the London circles, and of yet more promise, but who has since passed away. Speaking of the difficulty of establishing a good comic paper, even in London, he said, "Comic power is the thing wanted. Of artists—considered as artists—we have terrible surplus; but humor is a much rarer commodity. What was rare in this respect a dozen years ago is no less so now. There are not, at the present time, in England, six artists gifted with humor in the highest degree; nor does France appear to be a whit more productive of the genuine material. Social caricatures, or rather, views of real life and character seen through the medium of an eccentric fancy, are the very spinal column of a humorous paper, which, if lacking, is not illustrated. But something more than humorous fancy is necessary to absolute success. In the texture of a first-rate comic artist, dramatic power is not to be dispensed with. His faculty of observation must be acute and untiring, and he must be able to seize upon incidents and situations as they pass before him, and out of these to construct, without undue exaggeration, scenes of the sparkling comedy sort, with epigrammatic legends attached to them

to give the point of the story. Then, in addition to this, he must have a falcon eye for the subtleties of individual character, and the power of expressing this upon the boxwood block with the same freedom and dash with which he would throw off a pen-and-ink sketch upon paper. Execution has been a great snare to most artists engaged upon the best comic papers in this country, mere pretenses of drawing being too often looked upon as compensation for poverty of idea in the design. The kind of humor generally characterized as American, and of which "Artemus Ward" must be considered as the most successful exponent at the present time, is not of a quality practicable for the pencil; neither is it, whatever its originality and greatness of fit, in any sense, to be the staple of a comic journal. A piece of it is a capital thing to have, though, and such, it seems, is the opinion to-day of the heads that inspire the *London Charivari*.

Taking it altogether, the pictorial department of a comic paper is the most difficult one with which the editor has to deal. The "cartoon," or large illustration embodying some leading topic of the day, is a feature now considered indispensable to a publication of the kind. Those who have not tried can hardly imagine the difficulty of hitting on, at certain times, a smart idea for this hebdomadal clincher of current events. A "congress of heads" is the only means by which the thing can be managed with certainty and success. It is at the weekly dinner of *Punch* that the important matter of the cartoon is discussed and decided upon; and few will be so un candid as to deny that good cheer is an efficient prompter of wit. But comic papers have, ere now, been driven over stony roads, without ever a chance of pulling up to seek for inspiration at the festive head. Midsommer is usually a dreary time for the few brains that are left to invent the mythical cartoon. Nobody, who can help it, remains in town during the dog-days. The suggestive contributor—and an invaluable functionary is he—is fishing for trout and blaspheming black-flies by the margin of some highland stream. The brilliant paragraphist is usually too much straitened, financially, to fly to the rural districts, but his town engagements with Bacchus, Silenus, and Company, are of a pressing and imperative kind, and he cannot be relied upon in the hour of need. Under these circumstances, feeble spirits have to be conferred with; but the brunt of the situation has generally to be borne by the editor, at last.

The effects of comic journalism upon the editorial mind offer a nice little subject for analysis and dissection. I was acquainted with one who had had experiences in the conduct of such vehicles for pleasure as these under notice, and he used to relate harrowing things about the visions that disturbed his slumbers on the nights preceding the days for "making up." Box-wood had become a deadly upas for him. What the red-ear is to the moth, what the black-ash is said to be to the rattlesnake, such was the yellow-bog to him. His dreams were horrible illustrations of demon life and charnel drawn upon box. His phantasms would loom up as a stupendous numeral pile, composed of layers of box-wood blocks, of all sizes, from the large ones used for cartoons to the smallest, upon which initial fancies are usually cut. These were pencilled all over with grotesque figures of things hideous beyond human conception; and the originals of the portraits were there, too, moping and mowing about the pyre, upon which they were preparing to immolate the supine dreamer of the dream.

Few things are more acceptable to persons anxious to bring, or to keep themselves before the public, than to have notice—little matter how unflattering—taken of them by squib or caricature in the pages of a comic journal. A note will come to the editor, for example, a naughtily-looking little *blat-foeur* with frilled edges, and with it a *carte-de-visite*. The correspondent, haply some provincial actress of the muscular school, who wants to make a metropolitan sensation, and is anxious to have a broad caricature of herself in an early number of the paper. Should no notice be taken of this, the next thing, in all probability, is a call from the managing agent of the lady, who hints that money can be realized by the transaction, and, in some cases, even goes so far as to prompt the editor to name his price. I have known instances in which good round sums were offered to secure the desired notice. Sometimes a paragraph bearing reference to an individual who believes in advertising himself or his enterprises tickles the vanity of that person so greatly, that he will write to the editor, saying that a box of cigars, or a complete outfit of new clothes, is at the service of the writer of the gratifying pasquinade, if he will only send to or call at such and such a place for it; and I once heard a sagacious public character say that a certain satirical article in which he figured prominently was worth at least a thousand dollars to him.

Were people at large only half as liberal in subscribing to comic papers as they are in tendering advice by regard to the best course to be taken by the directors of them, success in that branch of journalism would be secure. Among the comic editorial experiences, the receipt of letters of advice forms a very prominent item. It is no unusual circumstance for several letters to arrive at the same time from different quarters, all of them giving the views of the writers as to how the paper should be conducted to satisfy the public and insure success, and each one of them taking up a position diametrically opposite to some of the others. Could the writers but hear the roars of "inextinguishable laughter," while being compared and criticized by the editorial staff, they would doubtless be surprised to find how funny they had become, unknown to themselves. One writer tells you that you must let a certain well-known political character alone, or else your paper will "expire the vital spark within a month." In the next letter opened you find a recommendation to devote at least a page a week, your leading satirical poet, and your most personal comic artist, to the chronic irritation of the individual in question, who is described as having "a skin as thin as his heart is black and his moral character revolting." In consequence of his moral character not trouble himself with reading letters of advice, but consign them to their proper limbo, on discovering their drift in the first lines.

The threatening correspondent is another scribbler, who sometimes wastes his feeble ire upon the management of a comic paper. Of course he writes anonymously, or under a *nom de plume*, and in a style and handwriting which, if not illustrated, he would probably be able to disguise. He tells you, in English adopted, "in for the nonce, marks and picture about A and B, who will be remembered long after you are forgotten." Then he hints at violence, and adds that "you may consider this a idle threat, but may find yourself mistaken by a crowd walking into your office sum day if you continue in the same track." It is needless to say that no harm ever comes from these silly fire-crackers.

No satisfactory conclusion has yet been arrived at as to the reason why a really first-class comic paper has never yet been successfully established in this country. I will not attempt to sift the question here, though I have an idea that the excess to which party spirit is carried may have something to do with the matter. As with other journals, so with that of a humorous character, the political ingredient is one that cannot be left out. Next, it would be impossible for a paper to take a middle bearing; and if it becomes partisan, it has, of course, battalions of foes to contend against. The necessary wit and humor for comic journalism must exist *seu-vellet* amid the large and mixed communities of the country, but they have not yet been developed by encouragement and culture, though, like the recreant meteors that failed to come to time in November last, they may yet make their appearance in the literary firmament.—*Atlantic Monthly*.

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