

FRANK R. STOCKTON Discloses Some of the Methods of a Literary Humorist

The Oft-Repeated Question and its Invariable Answer.

"I don't know"



"Frequently the Indifference of my Secretary to what I am dictating, discourages me."

"I never knew whether it was the Lady, or the Tiger"



FROM PHOTO BY MARCAN



"Well, I wasn't what you'd call a reporter," he continued, genuinely apologetic for that fact, "but I used to write, on different subjects."



He concluded this reminiscence, in a sad soft voice.



"I've always felt sorry for ghosts, their profession is not half appreciated"



"I don't write at all," said Stockton simply

"I had heard it offended the Prince of Wales, I was curious to know what would offend him."

MR. FRANK R. STOCKTON occupies so unique a field in American literature that it has puzzled many eminent critics to classify his work. I read, some while ago, an article by Edmund Gosse, who described Mr. Stockton's special outlook on life and people as a "literary squint."

This criticism was, of course, of the man as he saw him in his books. If Edmund Gosse had selected a nearer view of this American author, he would have seen a man with a pair of deep set, warm, black eyes that gleamed with intelligent, kindly humor, lighting up a very serious face, almost melancholy in its quiet restraint of nervous force and mental energy.

No man with two such eyes "squints" at anything, although the originality of his work has made his readers "squint," which was, no doubt, the trouble with Mr. Gosse.

At a recent meeting of the Authors' Club, in New York, Richard Watson Gilder told the story of a young writer who called upon him to propose a contract to write a new story every month.

"What kind of stories do you propose to write?" asked Mr. Gilder. "I think something like 'The Lady or the Tiger' would be an attractive idea," replied the literary fiddler, and his proposition is recorded in the office as an exhibit, for the museum in their reception room of writers who mistake a "squint" at literature for knowledge. It is impossible to look at Mr. Stockton without a curious, almost irritating, suspicion that he alone knows the answer to his literary conundrum, "The Lady or the Tiger?"

When you ask him about it he looks solemn, his eyes travel into a far off distance of mystery, and in his slow, easy manner of speech he says: "I don't know which it was. I never knew whether it was the Lady or the Tiger. Honestly, I'd like to know myself."

"Couldn't you easily have extended the story and gratified our curiosity?" "How could I? The story didn't have much over fifteen hundred words, and when I got to the end of it I just stopped, that's all. Its success was a great surprise to me. When the opera was produced taken from the story a lady whom I knew suggested that the last act could reveal the Tiger one night and the Lady the next alternately, so that the audiences would never know which they were going to see, but the theatrical folk wouldn't take those chances, and they never did it."

Theatrical literature is something which the makers of literature understand better than they are reputed to understand it. Although Mr. Stockton expressed no definite enthusiasm toward play writing, he inferred in his quiet way that he intended to write a play some day.

Literary Ethics in Humor. "Although my book 'Squirrel Inn' was dramatized, I can claim no greater distinction in that achievement than having written the book," he said, and he folded his hands modestly on his lap and tried to look the lesser half of that event, as becomes the author of most dramatized stories, according to modern tenets.

There is a suggestion in this view of the matter whether the gaping wounds that the stabbing process of dramatizers is dealing to literature are not separating the literary men from the theater entirely.

The literary humorist would never say of his books, as the comedians say of themselves and their plays, "It is to laugh," and I have even found that the men who have written representative American humor nearly all have the same grievance against the broad grin and the boisterous laugh that imply deliberate humorous purpose on the part of the author. They resent, politely, silently, of course, the accusation of being funny men in the sense of men who strive to be funny at the expense of literary ethics. When I suggested to Mr. Stockton that he was a professional humorist he looked at me suspiciously and was doubtful whether the imputation was complimentary or not.

"Yes, yes, no doubt, I suppose my stories are humorous," he said, his face more solemn and thoughtful than a professor of science, "but I don't know that my characters are different from ordinary people, or that they do anything that ordinary people would not do in certain situations. I always try to retain simplicity of characterization in any dilemma of plot."

ties of human nature?" I asked, bravely. He paused a moment, shifted uneasily in his seat, evidently uncertain whether to make the confession or not.

"I live in the country—I love the country," he said at last, and there was no humor in the sincerity of his sentiments as he went on:

"The characters in the country are more individual; they have more room to move about in than in the city. I never took much interest in the city people, perhaps because I never cared much to understand them. It seems to me as though the townfolk are all more or less alike—they imitate each other so much. Not that country people are more eccentric than the rest of the human family. I don't mean that, because I don't find them so, but I believe in native conditions that can be easily traced and explained and understood."

He hesitated a moment, for he talks slowly, because he thinks too rapidly, perhaps, and then said: "It's a hard matter to trace the native in a big city; he loses track of himself somehow or other in the crowded procession of town life."

A Reportorial Experience. "Have you never lived in a city?" I asked. "Yes, I worked on a newspaper in Philadelphia once, and"—he stopped short, uncertain whether his reminiscence of newspaper work in Philadelphia would be respectfully received by a New Yorker.

"You were saying you lived in Philadelphia," I said encouragingly. "Did you like it?"

"Well, I wasn't what you would call a reporter," he continued, genuinely apologetic of that fact, "but I used to write on different subjects."

"Did you ever go out on an assignment?" "Once—once only, and I covered myself with glory, if you will allow me to say so. I was told to get a report of a horticultural and florists' exhibit made at a great fair that was held in the city for a great fair that was held in the city for a great fair—a whole square of Philadelphia inclosed in glass. Well, I strolled in and saw at once that to make an exhaustive report of the matter would need an extra press in the printing department of the paper and a knowledge of Latin beyond any compositor ever born."

"What did you do?" "I went quietly to every exhibitor and asked him to write me a careful report of the technical history of his own exhibit. The next day I collected my stack of amateur manuscripts, containing expert descriptions, and wove out of the mass an article so learned and complete on the subject that a man who was sent to report the matter for a horticultural paper lost his job, and they used a clipping of my report. Oh! yes, the editor knew that I loved the country and flowers and trees, and so on, and figured that I was the best man to handle a horticultural article."

"In the realm of imagination you have no such expert testimony to draw upon?" "I said."

"You mean in fairy stories?" "Yes, that is one phase of fiction for children," I suggested.

"I don't write for children," he said; "I write for adults, or at least for people who can read and write!"

"Aren't fairy stories written for children?" "Some of them have that distinction among generous but misguided parents. I always felt that the writers of fairy stories were too prolific with fairy wings. It never seemed natural or reasonable that even fairies should be always spreading their wings and leaving every one else in the story standing around feeling small and inefficient in their inferiority of legs and arms. But, of course, these remarks apply only to my style of fairies."

"Fanciful subjects usually take poets' license!" I said.

"Of course, I don't mean to suggest that fancy should be banished, but there are so many things that have a better right to wear wings than fairies. For instance, one can quite imagine a fairy livery stable, where one can hire a bee, or a swell pair of high-stepping butterflies, harnesses to a comfortable wagon made of honeysuckle to take the air in."

How promptly and easily, without any attempt at manner to display the matter conveyed, did his mind travel into the fantastic world! I told him this, and inferred that one of the most remarkable features of his stories was their fantastic touch. It transpired that he had always had it, even from the very first story he ever wrote.

"What was the nature of the first serial story you ever wrote?" I asked him.

"Let me see—oh, yes, now I remember," and with the effort of recollection came a relaxation of arms, legs and body, forgotten by the mental absorption of the man.

"My first story was written for a magazine published before the war, and after the war broke out was never heard of again. I never saw out three parts of it in print, when the war came and swallowed the magazine and the rest of my manuscript. I've often wondered what became of that story?"

"What was it called?" I asked, breaking the pause that followed. "I called it 'A Story of Champagne,'" he said. "It was historical in a way. It was a tale laid in the French province of Champagne. The only feature that I remember of it was a situation that seemed very pathetic. Some one had left a fortune in his will to some one else and the heir to this fortune was, of course, deprived of the will by the villainy of somebody or other. This young man was very anxious to discover the will, and hunted ceaselessly for it. It so happened that at the very moment when the will was being

burned by the villain he chanced to be passing the house where this deed of destruction took place, and some charred portions of the burned documents fled up the chimney and dropped on his face."

"Did he recognize the will?" I asked eagerly. "I don't know exactly how it was done, but he brushed the charred part of his nose with his thumb and forefinger, incidentally losing forever a great fortune in the smudge on his face." He concluded this reminiscence in a sad, soft voice, without a smile on his face, then got up and walking over to the window, looked solemnly out upon the Broadway cable line.

Ghosts That Are Out of a Job. "What about ghost stories? Do you believe in ghosts?" I asked.

"I wrote a story once called 'The Transferred Ghost,' which answers that question in a way. I've always felt sorry for ghosts. Their profession is not half appreciated. It was partly this sympathy I feel for the melancholy destiny of ghosts that made me write the story just mentioned; it was my appeal in their behalf."

"An appeal to encourage our sympathies for them?" "Somewhat. I always felt that there must be quite a number of ghosts out of a job, so to speak. Ghosts that we never heard of, because they have not been assigned to haunt any one in particular. My transferred ghost was one of these unfortunate. He had no position; he was waiting for some one to die, so as to find a

place to be transferred from one abode of human crime to another. There can't be a very extended field of labor for ghosts, industrious as they are when they do get a job, as we know."

If it were possible to describe the dry, quiet monotone in which Mr. Stockton unravels these whimsical turns of his mental machinery, the peculiar originality of his stories would seem to be the most natural result of his logic. We only get a blurred reflection, at best, of an author in his books; it requires a personal contact with a man to discover the true sense of his nature.

I asked the question. "It is quite natural that you should ask me that," he said; "every one does. I could not explain the method definitely. I use different lenses in getting my imaginative focus. I'm like a photographer who puts up his camera in a crowded street, and, watching the procession as it glides on in shadowy semblance across his machine, instinctively waits till he sees a suitable picture, and snaps it," he said, dreamily. "I don't suppose he would attempt to record the jumble of objects about him, but his discretion, his taste, his particular eye select and approve."

"Do you write rapidly?" I asked. "I don't write at all," said Mr. Stockton, simply.

"I know better!" I said. "Actually, literally, I don't write at all. I dictate everything that I sign. I prepare every page of my stories mentally, even to the title, and my secretary, having taken it down in shorthand, reads her notes to me, then reads the page when it is typewritten, and I never look at the words till I receive the proof from the printers."

"In that way you carry the story with you everywhere all the time?" "No. I go into my study or sit on the porch of my house from 10 to 1 in the morning. I give my secretary something to read and I begin to dictate when the spirit moves. I have a hard time the first few days with a new secretary. They seem to be so interested in watching me and reading what I dictate. After a while they don't care at all what I write. Frequently the indifference of my secretary

place, in most instances, the incessant, rapid and often erratic movements of the fish themselves have to be taken into account; the aquaria being large, we have, in the second place, the difficulty of prompt focusing to contend with, due to the latitude enjoyed by the smaller and more active forms; thirdly, there is the question of reflection, and this, taken in connection with the light, is a serious problem. Reflections are especially troublesome, as the glass fronts of the aquaria receive them from all directions, so that after focusing a careful study of the image upon the ground glass will show these reflections, not only from some of the other aquaria, but possibly the photographer and his camera besides. All this must be carefully guarded against.

"The camera employed upon this occasion was an old model Blair tourgraph, with a Voigtlander lens (No. 1), an instantaneous shutter of the Low pattern, Seed's gilt-edged plates (5x3); I used stops as any special case demanded. A tripod is absolutely essential to success in this kind of work. The instrument was set up in front of one of the more favorable aquaria and focused upon the part desired and an inch or two beyond the surface of the glass. An armed plateholder was inserted in place of the 'snap' set. Patient waiting for an exposure when the fish swam to the surface where you want it is necessary. Care must be taken in drawing or pushing back the slide of the plateholder."—Washington Times.

Photographs of Fishes Swimming in Their Native Element

THE field of the camera is now practically unlimited. The photographic lens is now turned upon other worlds and it reveals hitherto hidden mysteries of the heavens. Lately it has been directed to submarine depths, and now we have the strange creatures of the sea and river as they live and move in their native element.

In this latter regard Dr. R. W. Shufeldt of this city has demonstrated the wonderful possibilities of photography under water. Dr. Shufeldt, who is well known as a scientist and writer, has co-operated with the Fish Commission in his labors, and has reached, as intimated, most astonishing and encouraging results.

Dr. Shufeldt's subjects were taken in the aquaria of the Fish Commission's building while floating idly in the water or swimming about for exercise or in search of food, so that the pictures represent the fishes as they habitually live instead of under such extraordinary conditions as leaping into the air after a fly or projecting themselves from the water to escape a pursuing enemy. The fish which Dr. Shufeldt seems to have the best luck is the common fresh water sunfish, known to many outside of the scientific world as "pumpkin seed." The intricate markings and mottlings of the species, together with their grouping, are beautifully displayed in several of the doctor's photographs. For fully two hours on an

intensely sultry afternoon," writes Dr. Shufeldt, "I was obliged to wait before one of these specimens came into the proper place to be photographed. The result, however, has repaid the trouble, as the pictures are as perfect as if taken through the medium of air instead of water. A very realistic picture of the large-mouthed black bass is among the finest examples. Other photographs made include those of the naked sturgeon, lying on its side and gazing upward with that rapt expression so characteristic of its kind; the brook trout, a very fine picture, and the catfish, very well taken."

From a photographer's point of view perhaps the most interesting of the pictures Dr. Shufeldt has taken thus far is that of a school of rainbow trout, 450 strong, taken while swimming. It is by no means a perfect photograph, many of the fishes being out of focus and others being so shadowed as to be hardly discernible, but not a figure exhibits any blurring from movement, and it is doubtful whether any other photograph extant shows so many living fish in one plate. Touching upon the matter of fish photography, Dr. Shufeldt says:

"To one having but little knowledge of the use of the camera, it would appear to be a simple matter to photograph under such apparently favorable conditions, but such is by no means the case. In the first

to what I am dictating discourages me. Then I try to arouse her by doing something sensational. I suddenly make the hero stick a knife into his sweetheart just to see if the secretary is really lost to all sensibility.

"Only the other day I was telling Mr. Eggleston that I had done something I had never done before; I had interested my secretary."

Love Interest Not Essential. "Have you always dictated your stories?"

"No; I couldn't do that at first. It's a development. My wife used to help me at first."

"Which must have given a love interest to the stories?" I suggested.

"Of course; but I don't believe that the love interest is such an essential quality as many authors would have us believe. It is a mistake to force into a story a love affair, for it is always more or less obvious to the reader."

Mr. Stockton makes flying visits to the city during the winter at short intervals, but he never does any work except at his home in the Shenandoah Valley, near Charlestown, W. Va.

"We took a furnished house in Washington once for a month," he said, somewhat sorrowfully I thought, "but that is the only time we have 'kept house' in a city."

"You received no inspiration to write a society novel, as a result of the experiment?" I asked.

"No. The smart set are not in my line. I do have society people in my books, but they are not remarkable in any distinction for that fact. I live on property that belonged to Washington, left in his will to his nephew, Bushrod Washington. The road along which George Washington passed with General Braddock runs through my place."

"Then we may look for a Colonial story?" "No. I'm purely contemporary. The novel I am working on describes this locality and occurs there, but my characters are not copies of my neighbors, however much they may inspire me."

Of all the plays accessible in New York, I was anxious to know which play would attract Mr. Stockton, and I asked him. "I don't go to the theater much, although I am very fond of it."

"What did you go to see?" "I went to see 'A Royal Family,' because I had heard it offended the Prince of Wales. I was curious to see what gave him offense."

"Why?" I asked abruptly. "Because I offended him once myself, or at least the English people, quite unintentionally. I wrote a story called 'The Great War Syndicate.' It was purely a fictitious description of a war between this country and England, controlled by a huge syndicate, in which the English were beaten. There was no bloodshed, either, no one killed, but one man, and he accidentally, because a derrick fell on him. It was merely a contribution to Anglo-Saxon literature, and not partisan in its intention at all. Last year I received a request from London Punch to write a story for it, the editor stating in his letter that I might choose any subject I liked, so long as it was not immoral. I did not find the instructions difficult to follow. Since they had written to an American author for an American story I gave them one. It was in three parts, a tale of the Cape Cod people, and I called it 'The Gilded Idol and the King of the South Sea.' I've not heard how it has succeeded."

Mr. Frank R. Stockton is a humorist who wears no badge of humor to identify him as a specialist. He has written histories, school books and stories, all in the proper balance of the duties they were born to perform. His father was a writer of religious articles, and there is a serious, almost ministerial solemnity about him that adds a personal charm to his quaint fashion of seeing and saying things. His satire is always considerate, and his humor is of America, for America.

PENNENNIS.