

MORE OR LESS PRACTICAL JOKES—By Julian Street

ON A CERTAIN morning, some forty years ago, James Gordon Bennett's New York Herald, leading newspaper of its day, came out with a first-page story describing the escape of animals from the zoo in Central Park. Citizens and policemen, said the story, had been clawed and bitten by lions, tigers and leopards which were still at large when the paper went to press.

The town was thrown into a panic. Mothers kept their children home from school and wives begged their husbands not to venture forth to work. Only those who read to the end discovered the truth. The date was April first, and the Herald was playing a practical joke on the metropolis.

The practical joke has a lineage as long, if not longer, than any other type of joke, and is the only form of joke honored by having a day set apart for it. All Fools' Day is an institution so old that no one is certain of its origin. Most European countries signalize it, and the ancient Hindus and Romans celebrated it as we do, by sending people on fools' errands and trying in other ways to make them ridiculous.

Many of the classic tales which come to us from the ancient literature of the East are founded on practical jokes—some of them very coarse—and the early literature of England, France and Italy is full of them. De Maupassant used the practical-joke structure in some of his stories; two of Mark Twain's most famous stories, *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg* and *The Jumping Frog of Calaveras County*, are the stories of practical jokes, and so is Kipling's *The Village That Voted the Earth was Flat*.

But in spite of its old and distinguished lineage, the practical joke has gained for itself more universal reprehension than any other kind of jest, including the despised pun. For whereas puns can only bore us, our dislike for practical joking is tinged with an element of fear, because practical jesters are so often ruthless or malicious, and the traps they set so often have sharp teeth.

Sauce for the Goose

EVERY now and then, one of those societies which are continually being formed for the purpose of changing something, comes forward with a plan to abolish All Fools' Day. Brand Whitlock has told me how, when he was mayor of Toledo, representatives of such a society called with a project for naming the first of April Optimists' Day instead of All Fools' Day. Whitlock replied that if any day were to be set aside for optimists, he knew of none more appropriate than All Fools' Day.

The tendency to practical joking sometimes runs in families. E. H. Sothorn, the actor, and his cousin, Harry Sothorn, are noted practitioners of the fiendish art, and E. H. Sothorn's father, E. A. Sothorn, famous in theatrical history for his characterization of the bewhiskered Lord Dundreary, was almost as widely known for his practical jokes as for his acting.

A reputation for jesting is a dangerous thing, and E. A. Sothorn's reputation as a practical joker once backfired on him in a manner which he did not find amusing. In 1879, he and William J. Florence came to the United States as co-stars, bringing with them, as a guest, the eighth Duke of Beaufort. A hoax was immediately suspected and a certain journal published a report that the duke was bogus. Sothorn and Florence vehemently denied this story, but their denials were not accepted seriously, and New Yorkers to whom they introduced their titled guest greeted him with grins and knowing winks. When the trio visited Canada, matters went still worse. Far from being amused at the supposed joke, the Canadians were indignant. Dinner invitations were recalled, the actors and their guest were everywhere snubbed, and the newspapers sharply criticized them on the

ground that they had attempted a jest which made the British peerage an object of derision.

Practical jesters are notoriously sensitive when the tables are turned upon them, and Sothorn and Florence were enraged. On getting back to New York, they consulted a lawyer with a view to suing the paper which first published the canard, but they were advised that such action was certain to cause further embarrassment to all concerned. In a huff, the Duke of Beaufort sailed for home, and an old newspaper declares that on the voyage he was stricken with a severe attack of gout, resulting in part from anger and humiliation.

Whether this experience modified the elder Sothorn's taste for practical joking, I cannot say, but it is certain that his celebrated son, E. H. Sothorn, did not profit by his father's lesson, for the theater echoes with tales of his pranks.

The late Rowland Buckstone was an excellent actor with a goodly paunch, who for more than a quarter century played in Sothorn's companies and during a considerable portion of that time lived in Sothorn's house.

Buckstone, a popular member of the Players' Club, was one of the best-natured men I have ever known, and he seemed always to enjoy the jokes played on him by "the Governor," as he called Sothorn. However, on one occasion he ceased to be the butt and himself assumed the rôle of practical joker, making a handsome job of it.

This occurred one night when news spread through the theater that Sothorn and his leading woman, Virginia Harned, were to be married. Standing in



Oliver Herford, About 1906

the wings at Miss Harned's side a few minutes before she was to make her entrance for a love scene with the star, Buckstone offered his felicitations.

"And," he added, "I know how hard it was for the Governor to tell you. He's so sensitive about it. Of course, he had to tell you before asking you to marry him, but my heart aches when I think of the pain it must have cost him."

"Tell me what?" asked Miss Harned. "What are you talking about, Rowley?"

"Then he hasn't told you!" exclaimed Buckstone. "Oh, to think of his having asked you without telling you! I wouldn't have believed it of him!"

"Without telling me what?"

"Don't ask me, dear. I'd rather not discuss it."

"But you must tell me! You must! What is it he ought to have told me?"



Julian Street at Palos Verdes Ranch, California, March, 1933. The Urn Still Intact After the Quake

"About his eye," said Buckstone darkly.

"His eye?"

"His glass eye."

"Oh, it's not true! I don't believe it!"

"Come and see for yourself, then," Buckstone took her by the hand and led her toward the star's dressing room. "He keeps spare ones tucked away all over the place. Come with me."

The Hand Deceives the Eye

"AH," HE exclaimed as he opened the dressing-room door, "there's one of them now." He pointed to the make-up table, where, a short time before, he had deposited an artificial eye. "Wait a minute and I'll find you some more." He made as if to rummage in the pockets of Sothorn's clothing, but Miss Harned, at sight of the glass eye staring upward from a saucer, rushed from the room.

A few minutes later, Buckstone stood in the wings, gleefully watching the collapse of a love scene between star and leading woman. Miss Harned spoke her lines like an automaton, and the radiant tenderness which usually illumined her face at this point in the play was absent. She was gazing narrowly, searchingly, not into, but at, Sothorn's eyes, scrutinizing first one, then the other, and Buckstone fancied he could hear her thoughts mingled with her spoken lines:

"Thou art the sun, the moon, the stars to me, my lord' . . . Is it his left eye? No, the left eye looks natural. . . . 'I never dreamed to love as now I love!' . . . But the right eye looks natural too. Maybe it is the left."

Sothorn, notoriously sensitive to the slightest irregularity in a performance, was manifestly disturbed by Miss Harned's strange behavior. When the two left the stage, explanations quickly passed between them, and immediately thereafter Buckstone

was loudly summoned by the star. But he was nowhere to be found.

On my first visit to Hollywood a number of years ago, my friend Tom Geraghty, once of Rushville, Indiana, later of the New York Herald, and for many years past a resident of the movie capital, took me to dinner at the house of James Cruze, who had recently directed *The Covered Wagon*, greatest motion picture of its time.

Cruze's place was in the country. He had built it, he told me, so that he could get away from Hollywood and be quiet. Before he built it he had lived in town and had no quiet at all—people dropping in all the time.

Once, in the middle of the week, Tom Geraghty called up the Cruzes and said he was planning to come out with a party of friends on the next Saturday.

"I know you'll understand, Tom," said Mrs. Cruze, who was Marguerite Snow, an early motion-picture star, "but Jim and I are all worn out. The house has been jammed with people for weeks and we're asking everyone to stay away this week-end."

An Ad That Pulled

DETERMINED to save the Cruzes from themselves, Geraghty ordered an advertisement inserted in the following Sunday's paper. In language almost poetic, it described a second-hand flivver, with all manner of accessories, for sale at a figure preposterously low. Inquiries were to be made by telephone only, and the Cruzes' number was appended.

Soon after daylight on Sunday morning, the Cruzes' phone began to ring. Farmers, attracted by the extraordinary bargain, called up from various parts of the country round to ask where they could see the car. The Cruzes, awakened and kept awake by the incessant ringing, became frantic. To the first few dozen inquirers they explained that they knew nothing of the car or the advertisement. Then Mrs. Cruze had a flash of intuition.

"Tom Geraghty did this!" she said, and everyone else who telephoned was informed that the car could

some years made practical joking a remunerative profession, until he gave it up for a still more profitable career as an actor in the talkies.

Mr. Barnett tells me that he began his professional practical joking as an understudy to his father, Luke Barnett, of Pittsburgh, who, for the past thirty years, has played engagements as prankster at private parties, banquets and conventions.

A favorite rôle with son and father is that of an officious head waiter who gives special attention to the guests it is desired to annoy, brushing against their hair as he passes behind them, bending over them solicitously and breathing heavily down their necks, and whispering corrections of their table manners. The low-voiced "Other fork, please," of the Barnetts has on many occasions stirred murderous instincts in gentlemen of the highest dignity and circumspection.

In the rôle of doctor, Vincent Barnett once addressed a medical convention and goaded a hall full of surgeons to frenzy by claiming to have removed an appendix without surgery, by means of hypodermic injections. Surgery, he told them, was mere legalized butchery, and ought to be abolished. There were cries of "Throw him out!"

Douglas Fairbanks, an inveterate practical joker, used often to have Vincent Barnett at his house to work on his guests. Once he set Barnett on Tom Geraghty.

"Are you a writer?" Barnett inquired.

"Yes," said Tom.

"Huh!" said the other insolently. "What did you ever write?"

That was his beginning, and within three minutes Geraghty was ready to assault him.

Having played scores of practical jokes on others, Douglas Fairbanks once played one upon himself, to the great delight of his friends, whom he promptly told about it.

One day as he was going to his office on the United Artists lot he encountered a well-dressed, pleasant-looking man whose face was familiar to him, and, characteristically, stopped and spoke to him. The

The other, asked for his opinion, declared himself tremendously impressed.

"I think it extraordinary, Mr. Fairbanks. In fact, if I may venture to say so, I believe it will surpass any picture yet made."

"By the way," asked Doug, delighted with this intelligent appreciation, "where do you come from?" The other looked surprised.

"You mean, where did I come from today, Mr. Fairbanks?"

"Yes. I know we've met and I've been trying to place you."

"Why, sir, I'm your second man at Pickfair."

A Question of Altitude

WC. FIELDS, who is to me the funniest man in the movies, has a diabolical gift for straight-faced comedy in private life. He and Tom Geraghty were in Florida making a motion picture when the real-estate boom was at its dizzy height. Harassed by mosquitolike swarms of real-estate salesmen, they amused themselves by seeming to consider the purchase of various large tracts of swamp land.

"I hear you're going to buy that property," said one of the salesmen to Fields.

"It looks very desirable," said Fields, gazing solemnly at the miasmatic bog.

"Well, take my advice and lay off it. It's only eight inches above sea level. The tract I want to show you is two feet above sea level."

"No, no," said Fields. "That wouldn't do at all."

"Why not?"

"My heart—I couldn't stand the altitude."

Nothing can cause more acute embarrassment than a certain type of practical joke when it backfires, as practical jokes have a way of doing every now and then.

Ernest Ling, a former vice president of the National City Bank of New York, and Doctor Barnesby, former medical supervisor of that institution, used to

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Booth Tarkington, With "Wops"



Gilbert White in Student Days

be seen at the home of Mr. Geraghty on Lanewood Avenue.

Geraghty, in the meantime, had motored to the shore for luncheon. Returning in the afternoon, he found the street before his house crowded with cars. On the sidewalk, his two sons, surrounded by a group of angry men, were vehemently denying all knowledge of a car for sale.

"We don't own a flivver! We don't know anything about it! . . . Here comes my father; he'll tell you."

"Came the night," and Tom Geraghty was still telling them.

Hollywood, which now works harder and keeps better bedtime hours than it did in the days before the talkies and the depression, nevertheless remains one of the world centers for practical joking. Indeed, the place has one inhabitant, Vincent Barnett, who for

other had a slight foreign accent and Fairbanks gathered, from the way he looked about, that he was a stranger on the lot.

"I'm going round to look things over," said the gregarious Doug. "Would you like to join me?"

"You are very kind, Mr. Fairbanks. I should enjoy it very much."

The tour of the lot consumed the better part of two hours, and when they reached a stage on which were sets for a picture Fairbanks was about to make, he asked the visitor if he would be interested in hearing the plot of the story.

The other replied that he would be greatly interested, but was afraid of taking up too much time.

"No," said Doug, "I'd like to see how it strikes you." And he told the story.



Wallace Morgan, the Well-Known Illustrator; Richard Harding Davis, War Correspondent, Author of *Soldiers of Fortune* and Many Other Novels, and the Author, Julian Street



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money back, all the banks will have to do is to sell the mortgages for money and pay their depositors.

That same power of credit might have been made to assume any other shape—the shape of ships, bridges, roads, dwellings, factories, or what else—but the borrower determined that the shape should be that of a skyscraper. He did not need a skyscraper. There may or may not have been any real economic need for it. That was not even debated. He must have hoped it would pay; the banks must have believed it was good for the mortgages. But the creative motive may have been one of ego, that a man should be able to say he had built a high tower in his city. That would be reason enough in this borrower's country, where the creed, both political and economic, is that if a man can but give security and collateral, he is entitled to all the credit he wants, no matter what he means to do with it. A British or French banker is aghast at that idea. He cannot comprehend it. He takes it to be a banker's responsibility to pass judgment not only on the security proposed to be pledged for a loan but also upon the use to which the credit will be put—which is to say, the shape of the debt.

A Vicious Circle

But now suppose the beautiful skyscraper does not pay. Its income from rentals is not enough to meet the interest on its mortgages. The man in the carved-mahogany-and-gilt office at the top of it loses the ownership. That is the least thing. The banks that own the mortgages would like very much to sell them, but there is no one to buy mortgages that pay no interest, and so the mortgages pass from the list of the banks' marketable assets into the realm of frozen assets. Now come the depositors to these banks wanting their money back because they have heard rumors that many real-estate mortgages are going bad. But if the banks cannot sell these mortgages for money, they cannot pay their depositors in money; and if anybody asks what of the contract wherein the banks undertook to pay their depositors back out of their own capital if their investments went bad, the fact is disclosed that they have already lost their capital in other mortgages and investments that went bad in the same way. If the depositors insist, they are told they are wrecking the credit structure of the country. If, nevertheless, they do insist, these banks shut up.

live not far from the Rockefeller estate, Pocantico Hills. It became their playful habit, when telephoning each other, to give false and financially important names.

One evening when Ling was at the Sleepy Hollow Club, he was summoned to the phone.

"This is John D. Rockefeller, Jr.," said the voice on the wire.

Ling, who knew Mr. Rockefeller only slightly and had never been called up by him, concluded it was Doctor Barnesby.

"Ah," he exclaimed brightly, "Johnny de Rock. Bigga da man. Mucha da mon."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Ling," said the voice. "This is John D. Rockefeller, Jr."

One skyscraper more or less in the wrong shape of debt would not matter, nor would the closing of a few banks. But the skyscraper, although itself very common, is one selected image of debt. After such a prodigious expansion of credit as occurred in the New Era Bubble the wealth of the country will contain an innumerable number and variety of things representing debt in shapes determined by the borrower, that are economically wrong, fantastic, unwanted or overvalued, and, therefore, like the skyscraper, do not pay.

Never before had there been so many of these unsound shapes representing debt. Illusion for a long time supported them; the borrower borrowed more to support them. Then suddenly inflated credit turned the face of inflated debt. Borrowers were all debtors. Let them pay! Yet how could borrowers pay when their things did not pay? Let them liquidate. But how can everybody sell everything all at once? Hundreds of banks shut up. Depositors began to run for their money. Credit currency collapsed. Thousands of banks shut up. And at last it was necessary for the Government by proclamation to induce in the entire banking system a state of blessed coma.

It is perfectly clear why, again and again, in a chastened mood for reform, we defeat the idea of sound banking. Unconsciously we do it, not deliberately.

Many say: "Why can't we have something like the British system? British banks do not fail."

But something like the British system would be literally torn to pieces in this country. Why? Because in the British system control of credit is an absolute, unpopular power. The people have learned that, on the whole, it is good, and to let it alone. They would not know how to interfere. A sound banking system requires control of credit and credit currency to be, in the first place, absolute, and, in the second place, unpopular; for the time comes when it is obliged to act in a manner contrary to the immediate desires of the people. It must be able to deny credit when people are rashly demanding it. Are we willing to pay that price? When we are we shall have sound banking. With any other reform we are only beguiling ourselves.

Do we want a unified banking system? The way to get it is well known. It is necessary only for Congress, in the exercise of a constitutional power already established in law, to impose a tax on the credit currency—that is, on the checks—of any but a bank that

belongs to a national system, just as once it put a prohibitive tax on the paper-money currency of any but national banks. But the reluctance to take this step amounts to a political instinct. In the March emergency, with the National Bank System and the forty-eight state systems in one coma together, the Government practically could have established one unified system simply by confining its assistance to national banks. But it included state banks in a common scheme of relief, instead of leaving the competitive state systems to the resources of state governments.

The Way Back to Health

Do we want, or now in this trouble do we only imagine we want, stability of prices and stability of money? The way to that achievement also is known. Once having got a unified banking system, then to stabilize money and prices it would be necessary only to invest it with absolute power, not only to control the volume of money but to control the volume of credit currency, which is so much more important—the power, that is, to expand and contract credit in constant ratio to the volume of production and business. In the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, after ten years of research, there is a body of scientific data upon which it would be quite feasible to base an automatic statistical mechanism to control credit and keep the volume of it constant to the economic need—a procedure much more precise than that by which we have learned to determine fair wages in relation to a price index of the cost of living.

That would eliminate the personification of a money power. But can you hear a politician asking: "Shall the will and spirit of free enterprise in this people be strangled by the impersonal tyranny of a statistical concept?"

Do we want security for the forgotten depositor? If we do, that would be a result. It would be also the mort of ecstasy. So, after 130 years of American banking, we hesitate between what we rationally know ought to be done, and, on the other hand, love of the dangerous credit ecstasy, and make believe that American banking can be made safe by a Government guaranty of bank deposits. As if unloading the problem of bank solvency on the taxpayer, who provides the public credit, or putting it anywhere outside of the individual bank, would make banking any more careful or responsible than it always has been.

MORE OR LESS PRACTICAL JOKES

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How Ling felt when it dawned upon him that Mr. Rockefeller was indeed upon the wire, I very well know from experience, having myself once made a similar bad guess.

At about the time the United States entered the Great War, when everyone was jumpy about spies, Charles Hanson Towne and I used to amuse ourselves in an injudicious manner by impersonating Germans. Towne was then editor of McClure's Magazine and I was doing some work for him. Always when he telephoned me he would give a German name; when I telephoned him I would do the same, and we would begin our conversations by discussing the military operations of the dear old Fatherland like a pair of Prussian Junkers.

The telephone in my workroom was not listed and only four or five people, Towne among them, knew the number. One day the phone rang and a secretarial voice informed me that Mr. Otto Kahn wished to speak to me.

I may pause here to remark that nothing is less probable than that the head of a great banking house should call me up. Naturally, it is not the head of a bank who calls up to say that one's account is overdrawn, or that more collateral is required, and even if it were, Mr. Kahn's bank, Kuhn, Loeb & Co., has never been the repository of my deficit. Some years earlier, at a musical *soirée*, I had met Mr. Kahn briefly. The thought never crossed my mind that anyone other than Charlie Towne might be speaking.

"This is Mr. Kahn, Mr. Street."

"Ach," I bellowed in my most guttural tones, "guten Morgen, Herr Kahn!"

In English, the gentle voice politely returned my good morning, and proceeded to outline certain war work on which it was desired that I, with a group of other writers, should engage.

I did some quick thinking. There was no way in which I could explain to Mr. Kahn. Anything I might say would merely make the situation worse, and so I dropped my clownish German accent and, sweating heavily, tried to talk sense.

It is my belief that all male children, save exceptionally good or exceptionally stupid ones, are born with a rudimentary sense of the comic which causes them, at an early age, to develop an instinct for puerile practical joking. No one teaches little boys to startle little girls by leaping at them from dark corners, or to place pins in the schoolroom seats of other little boys, or to pull the chair out from under a child who is in the act of sitting down. No one taught me to dip into my inkwell the blond pigtail of the little girl who sat in front of me at school—a crime for which I was properly dismissed.

How to Keep a Husband Home

The practical jokes of little boys are crude and often cruel, and so, too frequently, are those of the men into whom these little boys grow. A man with too great a love for joking is sure to hurt his friends. "He that will lose his friend by a jest," wrote a philosopher of long ago, "deserves to die a beggar by the bargain."

The practical joker who has hurt a friend turns, not to apology but to defense. "Can't you take a joke?" he asks reproachfully, and fails to realize that the question reflects, not his victim's lack of sportsmanship but his own insensitiveness.

The great danger about a practical joke is the risk that it may go tearing away like a runaway horse and do a lot of unforeseen damage.

Women seldom care for practical jokes, but some women will enjoy this one, the effects of which I watched in Paris when Booth Tarkington, Harry Leon Wilson and I were neighbors there twenty-seven years ago.

Among the friends from home we saw that summer were Mr. and Mrs. Ray Brown, he then art editor of Everybody's Magazine, she an accomplished professional pianist who later became widely known in the woman-suffrage movement.

Before their marriage, the Browns had agreed that neither should intrude upon the other's personal affairs. Such questions as "Where have you been?" and "What have you been doing?" were to be taboo in their household.

On one of their first nights in Paris, Mrs. Brown went to a concert while her husband investigated Montmartre, getting back to the hotel in the small hours of the morning. For two nights thereafter he continued his nocturnal excursions, leaving his wife to shift for herself. When, on the fourth night, she found herself again deserted, she put on her prettiest evening dress and sat in her room reading. After midnight the city became still. Now and then she would hear through her open window the clop-clop of a cab horse and the tinkle of its little bell. If the cab stopped at the hotel door, below, she would look out, but it was very late before she saw her husband enter.

Snatching up her evening wrap, she hastened to the floor above, and after strolling for a time up and down a dimly lighted corridor, descended and knocked at the bedroom door.

"Oh," she exclaimed brightly, as her husband let her in, "you got home first." She yawned, slipped off her wrap and began to make ready for bed, aware, as she did so, of his anxious, questioning gaze.

During the remainder of his stay in Paris, Ray Brown was given to fits of abstraction in which he would stare at his wife with brooding, speculative eyes. And she was always there to stare at, for he did not leave her any more.

When, recently, I wrote the Browns asking their permission to use this anecdote, Mrs. Brown replied that through my letter her husband had learned for the first time where she had been on that night of long ago.

Oliver Herford once had a club of which he was all the officers and all the members. It was known as the Farragut Club, and the clubhouse was the seat formed by the base of Saint-Gaudens' noble statue of Admiral Farragut in Madison Square. The club had stationery, and the list of officers appeared as follows:

President: OLIVER HERFORD
Vice President: O. HERFORD
Secretary: O. H.
Checkroom Boy: OLIVER

Herford once confided to me that the Farragut Club had been founded for the purpose of proposing for membership, and blackballing, Richard Harding Davis. Davis was blackballed several hundred times. Herford always assured him that he would be elected at the next meeting, but he never was. Many of Herford's friends at the Players' Club were similarly proposed and blackballed, and he himself remained the sole member until he went to visit Robert Louis Stevenson at Saranac and invited him to join. Stevenson feigned alarm at being proposed for membership in a club so exclusive, but when his name came up he was unanimously elected, and the Farragut Club became a club of two.

Herford and Booth Tarkington were once invited to luncheon by an editor to meet two pretty ladies.

"They'll both be late," the host warned the ladies. "Herford will be late, and Tarkington will be later still."

Batting for Tarkington

Both men were, in fact, late, but Tarkington arrived before Oliver. As he approached the table, he heard one of the ladies say: "This must be Mr. Herford coming," and with this line for a cue, he pretended to be Herford, his host abetting the deception.

When Oliver appeared, he caught the idea and pretended to be Tarkington. But where Tarkington had been merely a witty Oliver Herford, Oliver became a poisonously obnoxious Tarkington, vaunting and vainglorious.

"Have you read Monsieur Beaucaire?" he asked one of the ladies. And when she said she had not read it: "Oh, but you must get a copy right away. It's perfectly wonderful. Everybody's reading it. I've made a fortune out of it."

Tarkington stood it as long as he could. But the ladies were pretty and he could not bear to let them carry away the loathsome image of him Oliver was building up. And so he presently cried quits.

What the motor car is to the modern criminal, the telephone is to the player of practical jokes, and Tarkington, with his extraordinary gift for mimicry, has been a great telephone joker.

A friend of his who takes his club life very seriously was called to the phone one evening by someone describing himself as a colored man named Sam, who wanted to get a job at the country club.

"De boys say you de big man at de club, Mist' Gilman."

"Yes."

"I mean, you de big man."

"Yes."

"De boys, dey say, if Mist' Gilman just speak de word, it's all fixed. 'Cause you de big man. Ain't dat so?"

"That's right."

"Thanks, Bill," said Tarkington in his own voice. "I just wanted to hear you say it."

Stringing Along an Editor

Tarkington once rang up the late Robert Rudd Whiting, magazine editor, and introduced himself as an unknown author, Romaine Phelps by name, with a three-hundred-thousand-word serial for sale.

"You mean thirty thousand words, don't you?" Whiting said.

"No, Mr. Whiting, three hundred thousand."

Whiting explained that no magazine could possibly print so long a serial, but "Romaine Phelps" hung on, assuring the editor that his serial was "different" and that his mother pronounced it the finest thing she had ever read.

"I'll be glad to come and read it to you, Mr. Whiting."

"No, I couldn't do that. I never have stories read to me."

"I don't mean at your office. I'll come to your house evenings."

"No, that's not possible. I never work at home."

"Do you live in New York?"

"No, I don't."

"Just where do you live, Mr. Whiting?"

"I live away off—away down on Long Island. It's very inaccessible."

"You just tell me where, and I'll find a place near by."

"There isn't any place near by."

Whiting's voice was growing shrill. "There's no hotel—nothing."

"Don't let that disturb you, Mr. Whiting. Just give me your address and I'll find a place."

So the process of bedevilment continued until Whiting, one of the kindest of men, lost his temper.

"See here!" he shouted. "This has gone far enough! I won't allow you to come down and read to me! Such a thing is unheard of! I won't tolerate it!"

"All right, Bob. This is Tark. I just wondered whether you were cruel to unknown authors."

Upon hearing that a sportive friend had returned to the domestic hearth in Indianapolis after ten days in New York, Tarkington telephoned him, announcing himself as "Gus."

"Gus?" repeated the other blankly.

"Yes, sir. I got here all right."

"I don't recall anyone named Gus."

"Why, sure. I'm your waiter from Jack's. You asked me to come out here and live with you."

Two friends of Tarkington's, Wilkins and Blake, devoted to each other since their college days, had planned to meet in Kennebunkport one summer and take a ten days' motor trip. A week



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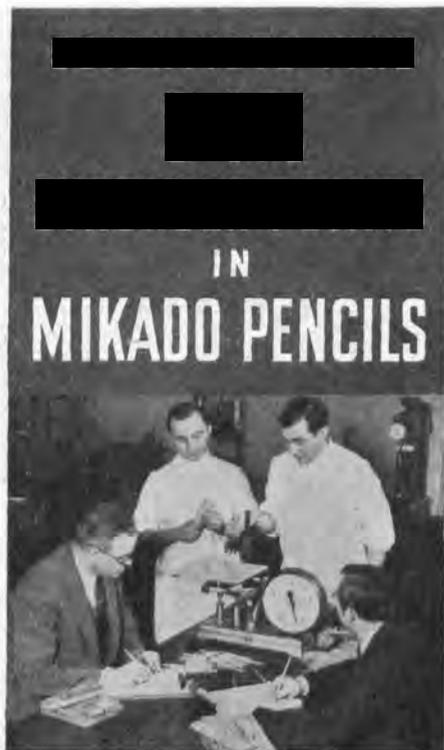
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before they were to start, Wilkins chanced to mention their itinerary to an old gentleman and his talkative wife, who, it developed, were planning to travel in the same direction, but by rail.

Wilkins had been to a party and was full of the milk of human kindness.

"Fine!" he exclaimed. "We'll take you in our car."

Instantly he realized his mistake. The whole idea of this outing was that he and Blake should be carefree and alone. To withdraw the invitation was impossible. He must think of some way to inveigle the old couple into declining of their own accord.

Building Up a Breakdown

He put himself on a diet of black coffee and cigars, and after three sleepless days and nights went hollow-eyed and trembling to their house.

"I'm on the verge of a nervous breakdown," he told them. "My driving isn't reliable. It wouldn't be safe for you to come."

"Oh, we won't be afraid," said the old lady. "I understand nervous people. You'll find me soothing. I'll take care of you."

Wilkins went to Tarkington.

"You're a writer, Tark. You have ideas. How am I going to get out of this jam?"

Booth had nothing to suggest, and Wilkins, disconsolate, returned to his hotel.

He had barely arrived when he was informed that the old gentleman wished to speak to him on the telephone.

"I think it necessary to tell you, Mr. Wilkins," said the voice on the wire, "that my wife and I both feel that you were not sincere with us this afternoon. It seemed to us that you were feigning illness to get rid of us."

"Why, my dear sir!" gasped Wilkins. "How can you imagine such a thing? We've been counting on you—absolutely counting on you!"

"Well, I can only tell you how we felt."

"Oh, what can I say—what can I do to make you realize how much we want you? It's too awful that you should think —"

"Would you submit to a physical examination?"

"Why—why, yes, if you think — Yes, I'd be glad to."

"Very well, Mr. Wilkins. Will you meet me at Doctor Merrill's office in the village at ten tomorrow morning?"

"Yes, yes, whatever you say."

"Kindly walk to the doctor's office, Mr. Wilkins. Cut off your left trouser leg and paint your leg blue."

"He's crazy!" Tarkington heard Wilkins say in an undertone to Blake; then: "Say, who is this?"

"Tark."

"Are you going to be home for a few minutes?"

"No," replied Booth, "I won't be here, and the house will be locked up."

John Barrymore has told me of his first meeting with Tarkington, long ago, at the bar of the old Lambs' Club in Thirty-sixth Street.

Immediately they got into an argument over the deeds of the Jute chieftains Hengest and Horsa at the time of their settlement in Kent. From

the Jutes they dropped back to Romulus and Remus, and Barrymore, feeling that Tarkington was unjust in his estimate of Remus, became belligerent.

"Look here!" he announced. "Another word against Remus and I'll have to punch you on the nose!"

"Where else could you punch me?" Tarkington asked, in humorous allusion to the impressive architecture of that feature. And so began a long-standing friendship.

To catch a practical joker in the act, and turn the tables on him, making oneself the victor instead of the victim, is a gratifying experience which I once enjoyed.

With Wallace Morgan, illustrator, I was traveling westward, gathering material for our book, *Abroad at Home*, when I encountered, in a St. Louis hotel, my friend Roy D. Chapin, then president of the Hudson Motor Car Company, more lately Secretary of Commerce in the Hoover Cabinet.

Late one evening, after a party, Morgan, Chapin and I returned to the hotel together, and at the desk I told the clerk I did not wish to be disturbed until eleven next morning.

I was, however, called at half-past seven, and, unable to get back to sleep, went down to breakfast, where I found Chapin and Morgan already at table.

"I thought you weren't getting up until eleven," was Chapin's greeting, and his wicked little smile told me who was responsible for my 7:30 call.

"The operator made a mistake," I said. "I complained to the manager, and she's fired."

"You had her fired?" Chapin's smile vanished.

I told him I had not wished to have her fired, but that the manager had disregarded my plea on her behalf. "The girl has worked here eight years," I said. "She broke down and cried. It made me sick. I haven't any appetite for breakfast." And I got up and left the table.

As a matter of fact, I was in great need of breakfast, but I sacrificed it in the name of art. I knew that Chapin would go to the manager as soon as he finished his meal, and I wanted to get there first.

The manager obligingly promised to back up my story, and between us we invented another harrowing detail, supplying the discharged telephone operator with a crippled mother, whose sole support she was.

On the Anxious Seat

Everything worked as planned. Chapin went to the manager, confessed, and asked that the girl be reinstated, but the manager stood firm, explaining that injustices sometimes had to be done for the general good of the service.

"You'll have to get the girl another job," I told Chapin when he came to me and owned up, "and I suppose you'll want to support her until she has a job."

"That's right."

"Better let her know about it as soon as you can," Morgan advised. "She's probably feeling pretty bad."

Chapin went to telephone her. But that, too, was provided for. The girl had no telephone, the manager told him. She had, however, an address, and I had seen to it that the address was in a far-off suburb.

"Well, I guess there's nothing for it but to get a car and hunt her up," said Chapin when he came back to my room.

Originally I had planned to send him on a nice long ride, but he was so

downcast that my cold heart melted, and I told him all.

The moral of this tale, I trust, is clear. Don't disturb my rest, or you may become Secretary of Commerce.

Gilbert White, painter and wit, returned from his studies at the Beaux Arts about the time his eldest brother, Stewart Edward White, came into the public eye as author of *The Blazed Trail*. At a tea party in New York, Gilbert found himself among strangers, but after he had stood for a time in a corner a little man rushed over, seized his hand and pumped it, saying: "I've just found out who you are, and I can't tell you how glad I am to meet you."

"I think you must have mistaken me for someone else," said Gilbert.

"Aren't you Stewart Edward White's brother?"

"No."

The little man dropped Gilbert's hand.

"Someone told me that you were," he said.

"No," said Gilbert with dignity, "he is my brother."

The Mock Turtle

Since the war Gilbert White has lived in France, spending his summers at Les Andelys on the Seine and his winters in Paris, where he heads the local branch of the American Legion and has a large studio in which he paints mural decorations for public buildings.

In Paris he is widely known as "*un homme gai*," and though he says he has found that practical jokes are usually impractical, and seldom plays them, the story of one joke of his has traveled through the whole of France and has become a classic.

It began when he acquired at a Montmartre night club, early one morning, a tiny turtle, no larger than a silver franc. He took the turtle home with him and gave it to his *concierge*, a woman of maternal instinct. A few nights later he stole quietly to the box in which the turtle was kept, and replaced it with another turtle, somewhat larger, and thereafter, at brief intervals, he made similar exchanges, culminating with the largest turtle he could find in Paris.

Amazed and delighted, the *concierge* could talk of nothing but the turtle's extraordinary growth.

"I have an art with animals, monsieur. It has always been so. Regard the happy effect of my care upon this creature. In two weeks it has become a giant. *C'est épatant, n'est-ce pas?*"

Having reached his climax, White reversed the process. Every few days the turtle became smaller. The anguished *concierge* changed its *salades*, but to no purpose. In spite of all her dietetic arts, the decline continued. The turtle diminished to its original proportions, and soon after, to the consternation of its keeper, vanished entirely.

"Understand, monsieur," lamented the *concierge*, "that I did my possible for this unhappy animal. I consulted the professor of zoölogy who lives *au quatrieme*, but he could explain nothing. Comfort yourself, monsieur, in this tragedy, for the case is historic."

