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George Ade

The American columnist, novelist, and playwright George Ade (1866–1944) is best remembered as a turn-of-the-century humorist from Indiana whose popular “fables in slang” transformed Midwestern manners into the stuff of genial social satire. Ade, who wrote a series of pieces for the *Chicago Record* from 1893 to 1900 filled with observations by alter-ego characters, is sometimes credited with having invented the modern newspaper column. Ade idolized Mark Twain and drew inspiration from him as he crafted his own brand of vernacular humor in the American heartland. (Twain admired Ade’s work, writing to William Dean Howells after reading one of his novels, that Ade “flashes a character onto his page in a dozen words, you turn the leaf & there he stands, alive & breathing.”) In 1904 Ade made Broadway history by being the first playwright to have three plays running simultaneously, the most successful of which, *The College Widow*, featured a high-spirited college football team at a school based on his alma mater, Purdue. Broadway audiences loved the energetic, slang-filled dialogue. A few years later when the play traveled to the Strand Theatre in London, the explanatory glossary of American slang handed out with the playbills failed to prevent English audiences from being hopelessly confused, and the play closed in a matter of weeks. Ade’s appreciation of the remarkable response to Twain outside the United States in this article may well have been shaped by the difficulty Ade himself had when he tried to export his own brand of American humor from Broadway to the West End.

Mark Twain as Our Emissary

Mark Twain had a large following of admirers who came to regard themselves as his personal friends. Many of them he never met. Most of them never saw him. All of them felt a certain relationship and were flattered by it. Men and women in all parts of our outspread domain, the men especially, cherished a private affection for him. They called him by his first name, which is the surest proof of abiding fondness. Andrew Jackson was known as “Andy”; Abraham Lincoln was simply “Abe” to every soldier boy; and, as a later instance, we have “Teddy.”

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Some men settle down to a kinship with the shirt-sleeve contingent, even when they seem indifferent to the favor of the plain multitude.

Mark Twain never practised any of the wiles of the politician in order to be cheered at railway stations and have Chautauquas send for him. He did not seem over-anxious to meet the reporters, and he had a fine contempt for most of the orthodox traditions cherished by the people who loved him. Probably no other American could have lived abroad for so many years without being editorially branded as an expatriate. In some sections of our country it is safer to be an accomplice in homicide, or a stand-patter in politics, than it is to be an "expatriate." When Mr. Clemens chose to take up his residence in Vienna he incurred none of the criticism visited upon Mr. William Waldorf Astor. Every one hoped he would have a good time and learn the German language. Then when the word came back that he made his loafing headquarters in a place up an alley known as a *stube*, or a *rathskeller*, or something like that, all the women of the literary clubs, who kept his picture on the high pedestal with the candles burning in front of it, decided that *stube* meant "shrine." You may be sure that if they can find the place they will sink a bronze memorial tablet immediately above the main faucet.

Of course, the early books, such as "Innocents Abroad," "Roughing It," and "The Gilded Age" gave him an enormous vogue in every remote community visited by book-agents. The fact that people enjoyed reading these cheering volumes and preserved them in the bookcase and moved out some of the classics by E. P. Roe and Mrs. Southworth in order to make room for "Tom Sawyer" and "Huckleberry Finn," does not fully account for the evident and accepted popularity of Mark Twain. Other men wrote books that went into the bookcase but what one of them ever earned the special privilege of being hailed by his first name?

When a man has done his work for many years more or less under the supervising eye of the public, the public learns a good many facts about him that are in no way associated with his set and regular duties as a servant of the public. Out of the thousand-

and-one newspaper mentions and private bits of gossip and whispered words of inside information, even the busy man in the street comes to put an estimate on the real human qualities of each personage, and sometimes these estimates are surprisingly accurate, just as they are often sadly out of focus.

Joseph Jefferson had a place in the public esteem quite apart from that demanded by his skill as an actor. Players and readers of newspapers came to know in time that he was a kind and cheery old gentleman of blameless life, charitable in his estimates of professional associates, a modest devotee of the fine arts, an outdoor sportsman with the enthusiasm of a boy, and the chosen associate of a good many eminent citizens. When they spoke of "Joe" Jefferson in warmth and kindness, it was not because he played "Rip Van Winkle" so beautifully, but because the light of his private goodness had filtered through the mystery surrounding every popular actor. William H. Crane is another veteran of the stage who holds the regard of the public. It knows him as a comedian, and also it knows him as the kind of man we should like to invite up to our house to meet the "folks." The sororities throb with a feeling of sisterhood for Miss Maude Adams because the girls feel sure that she is gracious and charming and altogether "nice."

Mark Twain would have stood very well with the assorted grades making up what is generally known as the "great public" even if he had done his work in a box and passed it out through a knot-hole. Any one who knew our homely neighbors as he knew them and could tell about them in loving candor, so that we laughed at them and warmed up to them at the same time, simply had to be "all right." Being prejudiced in his favor, we knew that if he wanted to wear his hair in a mop and adopt white clothing and talk with a drawl, no one would dare to suggest that he was affecting the picturesque. He was big enough to be different. Any special privilege was his without the asking. Having earned 100 per cent. of our homage he didn't have to strain for new effects.

His devotion to the members of his family and the heroic performance in connection with the debts of the publishing house undoubtedly helped to strengthen the general regard for

him. Also, the older generation, having heard him lecture, could say that they had "met" him. Every one who sat within the soothing presence of the drawl, waiting to be chirked up on every second sentence with a half-concealed stroke of drollery, was for all time a witness to the inimitable charm of the man and the story-teller.

The knowledge of his unaffected democracy became general. No doubt the housewives loved him for his outspoken devotion to home-cooking. Has any one told in public the anecdote of his tribute to an humble item in the bill of fare? It was at a dinner party in Washington. Senator Hearst was giving the dinner, and Mark Twain was the guest of honor. Here were two transplanted westerners who knew more about roughing it than ever appeared in a book. As the high-priced food was being served to them, they talked longingly of the old-fashioned cookery of Missouri. The Senator wondered if there was any real corned beef and cabbage left in the world. Mark Twain spoke up in praise of the many old-time dishes, reaching his climax when he declared that, in his opinion, "Bacon would improve the flavor of an angel!"

Furthermore is it not possible that much of the tremendous liking for Mark Twain grew out of his success in establishing our credit abroad? Any American who can invade Europe and command respectful attention is entitled to triumphal arches when he arrives home. Our dread and fear of foreign criticism are still most acute. Mrs. Trollope and Captain Marryat lacerated our feelings long ago. Dickens came over to have our choicest wild flowers strewn in his pathway and then went home to scourge us until we shrieked with pain. Kipling had fun with us, and for years after that we trembled at his approach. George Bernard Shaw peppers away at long range and the "London Spectator" grows peevish every time it looks out of the window and sees a drove of Cook tourists madly spending their money.

It is a terrible shock to the simple inlander, who has fed upon Congressional oratory and provincial editorials, when he discovers that in certain European capitals the name "American" is almost a term of reproach. The first-time-over citizen from Spudville or Alfalfa Center indicates his protest by wearing a

flag on his coat and inviting those who sit in darkness to come over and see what kind of trams are run on the Burlington. The lady, whose voice comes from a point directly between the eyes, seeks to correct all erroneous impressions by going to the table d'hôte with fewer clothes and more jewels than any one had reason to expect. These two are not as frequently to be seen as they were twenty years ago but they are still gleefully held up by our critics as being "typical."

Probably they are outnumbered nowadays by the apologetic kind,—those who approach the English accent with trembling determination and who, after ordering in French, put a finger on the printed line so that the waiter may be in on the secret.

There are Americans who live abroad and speak of their native land in shameful whispers. Another kind is an explainer. He becomes fretful and involved in the attempt to make it clear to some Englishman with a cold and fish-like eye that, as a matter of fact, the lynchings are scattered over a large territory, and Tammany has nothing whatever to do with the United States Senate, and the millionaire does not crawl into the presence of his wife and daughters, and Morgan never can be King, and citizens of St. Louis are not in danger of being hooked by moose. After he gets through the Englishman says "Really?" and the painful incident is closed.

Every man is handicapped and hobbled when he gets out of his own bailiwick. The American is at a special disadvantage in Europe. If he cannot adapt himself to strange customs and social regulations, he thinks that he will be set down as an ignoramus. If he tries to nullify or override them he may be regarded as a boor or a barbarian. Once in a while an American, finding himself beset by unfamiliar conditions, follows the simple policy of not trying to assimilate new rules or oppose them, and merely goes ahead in his own way, conducting himself as a human being possessed of the usual number of faculties. This odd performance may be counted upon to excite wonder and admiration. Benjamin Franklin tried it out long ago and became the sensation of Europe. General Grant and Colonel Roosevelt got along comfortably in all sorts of foreign complications merely by refusing to put on disguises and to be play-actors. But Mark Twain

was probably the best of our emissaries. He never waved the starry banner and at the same time he never went around begging forgiveness. He knew the faults of his home people and he understood intimately and with a family knowledge all of their good qualities and groping intentions and half-formed plans for big things in the future; but apparently he did not think it necessary to justify all of his private beliefs to men who lived five thousand miles away from Hannibal, Missouri. He had been in all parts of the world and had made a calm and unbiased estimate of the relative values of men and institutions. Probably he came to know that all had been cut from one piece and then trimmed variously. He carried with him the same placid habits of life that sufficed him in Connecticut and because he was what he pretended to be, the hypercritical foreigners doted upon him and the Americans at home, glad to flatter themselves, said, "Why, certainly, he's one of us."

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