SOME HUMORS OF AMERICAN HISTORY

BY JAMES FORD RHODES

In Carlyle's correspondence and in the text of his "Frederick the Great" there is much bewailing of the amount of drudgery he has been obliged to go through to get at the facts with which he may construct his narrative. If I remember correctly, the lack of indexes to German books is one of his grievous complaints and in the midst of his relation of the ending of the First Silesian War, studying long-winded despatches, which are exceedingly stiff reading, he thus breaks out: "O reader, what things have to be read and carefully forgotten; what mountains of dust and ashes are to be dug through and tumbled down to Hades to disengage the smallest fraction of truly memorable! Well if, in ten cubic miles of dust and ashes you discover the tongue of a shoe-buckle that has once belonged to a man in the least heroic, and wipe your brow invoking the supernal and the infernal gods." "May the infernal gods deal with these diplomatic dealings and reduce Dryasdust to limits!"

I can well imagine some enthusiastic American admirer reading Carlyle's remark in his fourth volume, "The incalculable Yankee nation itself biggest phenomenon (once thought beautifullest) of these Ages!" and at once saying: "Do, Mr. Carlyle, write the history of our Civil War." To which the Sage of Chelsea would reply in words actually used by him: "No war ever raging in my time was to me more profoundly foolish-looking." It was a "smoky chimney which had taken fire."

Had Carlyle lived as long as Ranke, practically writing

up to his dying day, and had our Civil War attracted him, he might have been led to admire the easy and methodical arrangement of our historical materials, the accessibility of our libraries and the various helps at hand which render the lot of the American historian an easy one compared with that of his European compeer, who has to pore over books without indexes and delve among manuscripts in dusty archives. And what is more to the point connected with the subject of my present paper, I think he would have enjoyed the many humors which cannot escape the investigator. It is not necessary to consider here why the people of one nation fail to appreciate the humor of another. That subject has been discussed with wide intelligence and excellent temper by John Graham Brooks, who mentions one of the most striking instances: that of Alphonse Daudet doing his best to laugh over the pages of Mark Twain, but always in vain. Our newspapers and after-dinner speakers have made merry over the non-appreciation of American humor by Englishmen and I hope that this merriment has reached its culmination in Chauncey Depew's thread-bare and not very funny story of "What is the matter with the huckleberry pie?" Certainly a country which has produced Shakespeare and Dickens and supported Punch (not to mention a dozen other examples) has no apology to offer to any other country touching any deficiency in its sense of humor. Nevertheless, as Americans generally appreciate the fun in Scott and in Burns, it has always seemed to me that the Scotch understood our somewhat grotesque variety of humor better than did their countrymen south of the Tweed. Bryce wrote that "humor is a commoner gift in America than elsewhere" and the Americans "are as conspicuously the purveyors of humor to the nineteenth century as the French were the purveyors of wit to the eighteenth" and it seems to me that if his brother Scotchman Carlyle could have been attracted to the history of our country he might, if not tormented by his dyspepsia, have seen some humor in the instances that

I have collected together for the purpose of our examination this morning.

I shall begin with Benjamin Harrison and work my chronology backwards. One of the comic papers, thinking it had lighted upon a bit of keen satire pictured President Harrison in the effort of wearing his grandfather's hat. The hat was at first too big for the presidential head and Harrison's head and body kept growing smaller and smaller as the criticism of the paper increased in sharpness and injustice, so that the disproportion between his head and grandfather's hat was immense. This caricature was widely spread so that it may be said to have pervaded the life of the people. Now for an incident which was told me by Paul Leicester Ford. A townsman and old friend of Harrison's came on from Indianapolis for a visit to Washington, and his first duty and pleasure was to call upon the President. Going to the White House he said to the chief usher, I want to see President Harrison. At once came the reply, "The President cannot be seen to-day," when the Indianapolis citizen exclaimed, "Good Heavens, has he got so small as that!"

The implication of the comic paper that Benjamin Harrison was inferior in ability to his grandfather, William Henry, was decidedly incorrect. Benjamin was much the abler of the two. William Henry Harrison owed his election as president to having gained a victory over the British and Indians during the War of 1812 and to his living in a log cabin and drinking hard cider. He believed that polished American eloquence meant the use of undigested bits of classic lore out of Plutarch and the Encyclopaedias; and his inaugural address was full of Roman consuls, of the Curtii, the Decii, Camillus, Caesar, Antony, Brutus and the rest. What the address was before Daniel Webster, the prospective Secretary of State, used his blue pencil on it, must be left to conjecture. Webster was late in arriving at a dinner party and after his apology he replied to the remark of his host that he looked tired and to the question whether any-

thing had happened. "Something indeed has happened," said the great man, "I have had a very stiff job. I have killed no less than seventeen Roman proconsuls."

Van Buren, whom William Henry Harrison succeeded in the White House was a New Yorker, fond of the good things of life, and, during the campaign of 1840, the simple diet of Harrison was contrasted with the *soupe à la reine, paté de foie gras* and *dinde desossé*, on which his competitor was supposed to dine or sup in the so-called President's Palace. Harrison undoubtedly inherited the steward, cook and kitchen of Van Buren, but, after a short while, so the story goes, he wearied of the food and cooking and demanded such a dinner as he was accustomed to eat in his log cabin at North Bend on the Ohio River. Boiled corned beef and cabbage was the repast. He ate immoderately. He had indigestion, then a chill, followed by bilious pneumonia of which he died one month after his inauguration.

Webster, being late at dinner, calls to mind a circumstance in the career of another great lawyer, William M. Evarts. I must premise that no word so well describes Andrew Johnson's course as President as "asinine." As everybody knows, there was a fierce quarrel between him and Congress and in the end he was impeached by the House of Representatives. Evarts was one of his counsel and the preparation of the defence in the trial before the Senate fell largely to him. Working on it all of a Sunday, on coming to Senator Sumner's to dinner, he excused his breach of the commandment by saying, "Is it not written that if thine ass falleth into a pit, it is lawful to pull him out on the Sabbath day?"

Andrew Johnson suggests his fierce vindictive and unrelenting opponent, Thaddeus Stevens, who was characterized by sardonic humor. The story has been often told, but it will bear repetition, as it brings Stevens into connection with Lincoln. When Lincoln was hesitating, in regard to the appointment of Cameron as his Secretary of War, Stevens went to him and protested

against the appointment in no mealy-mouthed phrase. "You don't mean to say," said Lincoln, "that Cameron would steal?" "No," said Stevens, "I don't think he would steal a red-hot stove." Lincoln could not forbear telling this remark to Cameron, which naturally made him very angry and led him to protest to Stevens in hot indignation, saying a gross injury was done him and that Stevens must retract the offensive phrase and this he agreed to do. The next scene is between Stevens and Lincoln. "Mr. Lincoln, why did you tell Cameron what I said to you?" "I thought," was the reply, "that it was a good joke and I didn't think it would make him mad." "Well," said Stevens, "he is very mad and made me promise to retract. I will now do so. I believe I told you that I didn't think he would steal a red-hot stove. I now take that back."

In any dissertation upon the humors of American history Abraham Lincoln must bulk large, as his keen sense of humor and his aptness at illustrative anecdotes are known to everyone who knows his name. In him pathos and humor were so blended that Petroleum V. Nasby, the humorist, thought Lincoln's the saddest face he had ever looked upon; and Lincoln mixed fun with seriousness when he decided upon the Proclamation of Emancipation, the carrying out of which, the giving freedom to 4,000,000 human beings led Mommsen to declare that our Civil War was "the mightiest struggle and most glorious victory as yet recorded in human annals."

In July, 1862, Lincoln submitted to his Cabinet a proclamation freeing the slaves, but on an objection of Seward, which seemed to the President to have great weight, he laid it aside until the Union armies should gain a victory. It seemed to both Lincoln and Seward that such an edict ought to have the support of military success. From the cabinet meeting of July 22, when the President announced tentatively his purpose, to that of September 22 when he told his advisers he should issue an irrevocable decree, the working of his mind is open to

us. While he had come to a conclusion, he showed the true executive quality as well as the fair mind, ready to change for sufficient reason, in not regarding the policy of thus hitting slavery, as absolutely and stubbornly determined until it had been officially promulgated. He endeavored by correspondence, through formal interviews and private conversation to get all the light possible to aid him in deciding when the proper moment had come to proclaim freedom to the slaves.

Turning the question over in his mind, he settled his doubts; he believed that a proclamation of freedom was a military necessity and that the plain people of the North would see it as he did. As the days went on, he was confirmed in the conclusion which he had come to in July and he felt that public sentiment was growing in that direction. In the dark hours following the second defeat of Bull Run and Lee's invasion of Maryland, he did not falter. "When the rebel army was at Frederic" (Sept. 6-10, 1862) he afterwards said, "I determined, as soon as it should be driven out of Maryland to issue a proclamation of emancipation. . . . . I said nothing to anyone, but I made the promise to myself and to my Maker." Antietam was won. Lee had crossed the Potomac into Virginia.

A point in the history of civilization was the meeting, Sept. 22, 1862, of the cabinet council at the White House. After some general talk, the President took the word and read from Artemus Ward's book a chapter "High Handed Outrage at Utica." This has always seemed to me a remarkable circumstance. There can be no question that Lincoln was very much impressed with the seriousness of the act he was about to perform. His summer had been full of perplexity and disappointment. Until Antietam, he had had nothing but military failure. McClellan's Peninsular campaign had come to naught. Pope, whom he had thought might prove a fit commander for the Army of the Potomac, had been overwhelmingly defeated at Bull Run and Lee's Army, flushed with victory, had threatened Washington, Baltimore and Harris-

burg. From a Confederate army in Kentucky, Cincinnati had been in imminent danger of capture and at the time of this Cabinet meeting Louisville stood in jeopardy. The President had hoped that McClellan would destroy Lee's army. The victory at Antietam simply turned back the Confederate invasion. It is extraordinary that a man of deep feeling who had had so much distress, who knew that the actors in the great scenes of history ushered them in with gravity—generally with pomp and prayer—it is extraordinary, I say, that he should have begun his cabinet meeting, which he felt might be one of the most solemn events of his country's history, in a manner so grotesque. I confess to having been susceptible to Artemus Ward's humor. It would have been unnatural for a boy brought up in the fifties in the Puritanical town of Cleveland to be otherwise. Life was as serious there as in the ordinary New England community and the *Saturday Evening Plain Dealer*, of which Artemus Ward was local editor and in which he published weekly one of his articles, brought joy to the household. Those articles seemed very funny then and I can read some of them now with a slight degree of amusement. In making my study of this famous cabinet meeting I tried to call up my youthful delight in Artemus Ward and in some such mood read Lincoln's introduction to his solemn announcement. Whether it be that there is really no humor in it or whether it be disgust at the juxtaposition of this silly showman's talk with the sublime words of the proclamation I can see no fun in it. The article jars upon me as a discord in a Beethoven symphony does upon a lover of music. Artemus Ward's contribution to this cabinet meeting is brief and the reading of it entire will in a measure bring back the scene when eight grave men sat around the council board. As a word of explanation, I must say that much of the fun in Artemus Ward consists in his manner of misspelling words. I cannot pretend to give an idea of this in my pronunciation but I imagine that Lincoln in his reading represented this with exactness.

I shall now read Artemus Ward's.

HIGH-HANDED OUTRAGE AT UTICA.

"In the Faul of 1856, I showed my show in Utiky, a trooly grate sitty in the State of New York.

The people gave me a cordyal recepshun. The press was loud in her prases.

1 day as I was givin a descripshun of my Beests and Snaiks in my usual flowry stile what was my skorn and disgust to see a big burly fellor walk up to the cage containin my wax figgers of the Lord's Last Supper, and cease Judas Iscarrot by the feet and drag him out on the ground. He then commenced fur to pound him as hard as he cood.

'What under the son are you abowt?' cried I.

Sez he, 'What did you bring this pussylanermus cuss here fur?' & he hit the wax figger another tremenjis blow on the hed.

Sez I, 'You egrejus ass, that air's a wax figger—a representashun of the false 'Postle.'

Sez he, 'That's all very well fur you to say, but I tell you, old man, that Judas Iscarrot can't show hisself in Utiky with impunerty by a darn site!' with which observachun he kaved in Judassis hed. The young man belonged to 1 of the first famerlies in Utiky. I sood him, and the Joory brawt in a verdick of Arson in the 3d degree."

Lincoln, as Chase tells the story in his diary, thought the article very funny and enjoyed the reading of it greatly; the members of the cabinet except Stanton laughed with him. The President then fell into a grave tone and told of the working of his mind on the slavery question since the July meeting. "The rebel army is now driven out of Maryland," he said, "and I am going to fulfill the promise I made to myself and my God. I have got you together to hear what I have written down. I do not wish your advice about the main matter; for that I have determined for myself."[1] He read his great

[1] Chase's Diary (Warden), p. 481.

proclamation of freedom: "On the first day of January in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, all persons held as slaves within any State, or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward and forever free." All the members of the cabinet, except Blair, approved substantially the proclamation and his objection was on the score of expediency not of principle. On the morrow, Sept. 23, 1862, this edict, this mark of the world's progress, was given to the country.

Lincoln has suffered much from having jokes ascribed to him which he never perpetrated and the most cruel one I have ever heard was by Robert Ingersoll, the high-priest of Agnosticism in his really great oration on Abraham Lincoln. The proclamation of Sept. 22, 1862 needed a supplement to be issued January 1, 1863 and Robert Ingersoll related the circumstance somewhat in this wise: "Lincoln read to his Cabinet the draft he had determined on and at the conclusion of the reading, Secretary Chase, a very religious man, said, 'It is all right, Mr. President, except that in my judgment there ought to be something about God in it.' 'Oh, no,' said Lincoln, 'that would spoil it.'" Ingersoll, for the sake of raising a laugh, gave his audience a wickedly wrong impression. Of course, Lincoln not only made no such remark but he could not have made it. No one who studies his character can fail to be impressed with his sincere theism and the whole story of the proclamation as I have told it shows his reliance on a superior power. There was no cant about Lincoln's religion and his ending of the January 1st proclamation in accordance with Chase's suggestion was a sincere expression. "And upon this act," he wrote, "I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God."

Another anecdote fastened upon Lincoln always gives me a painful feeling. It is assigned to the spring of 1863 when Grant was beginning his campaign against Vicksburg. It will be remembered that, up to this time, all

the generals of the Army of the Potomac, and some elsewhere, had proved failures and that on the whole the most conspicuous success had been Grant. Some zealous persons came to see Lincoln and demanded Grant's removal because he drank too much whiskey. As the story goes, Lincoln asked what brand he drank, because he added, "If I knew what brand of whiskey he drinks, I would send a barrel or so to some other generals." I cannot believe the story, because there were some serious subjects on which Lincoln would not jest and this, I think, was one of them, for both he and his Secretary of War, Stanton, were at this time much disturbed at the reports of Grant's intemperance. The literature of the subject attests this anxiety in some degree and the traditions put it beyond doubt. One of these I will mention. A rich man in Cleveland, being much wrought up over the disasters of the Northern armies and particularly affected by the gloom following Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, seriously considered the idea of converting a part of his property into gold and sending it to England. The pecuniary sacrifice would be so great and the lack of patriotism so apparent that, before coming to a decision, he went on to Washington to look the ground over and consult an intimate friend who was very close to Stanton. His friend put the situation before him in a nut shell: "If we can take Vicksburg," he said, "we shall win and if we can keep Grant sober, we shall take Vicksburg."

It is a far cry from Lincoln back to Henry Clay, but no account of humors in American history can avoid touching upon the virulent party and personal contest between Clay and Andrew Jackson which began as early as 1825 and lasted until Jackson's death. The bitterness between the principals was communicated to their adherents and no other partisanship in our history has been so heated and so long-enduring. Miss Murfree refers to this, in her story of the "Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains," in an account of a significant discussion between two old men of Tennessee, which

took place many years after the deaths of both Jackson and Clay. Both of these old Tennesseeans were past seventy, one was a paralytic, whose every word and motion was accompanied with a convulsive gasp and jerk; the other, a trifle younger than his associate was saturnine and lymphatic. They belonged to the same family, lived in the same house in the mountainous region of East Tennessee and passed their days sitting in rude armchairs on either side of a huge fireplace. An actual political contest between Republican and Democrat was being discussed by the younger members of the family and as the old paralytic listened, his eye blazing, his chin quivering, his pipe shaking in his palsied hand, he exclaimed with intense bitterness: "The stren'th an' the seasonin' hev *all* gone out in the lan'! Whenst I was young, folks knowed what they war an' they let other folks know too, ef they hed ter club it inter 'em. But them was Old Hickory's times [let me remind you that Andrew Jackson was called Old Hickory by his admirers]. Waal, waal, we aint a-goin' ter see Old Hickory no more—no—more!"

This irritated the other old man, who said with asperity: "I hopes not, I hopes we'll never see no sech tormentin' old Dimmycrat agin. But law! I needn't fret my soul, Henry Clay shook all the life out'n him five years afore he died. Henry Clay made a speech agin Andrew Jackson in 1840 what forty thousan' people kem ter hear. *Thar* was a man fur ye! He had a tongue like a bell; pears like ter me I kin hear it yit when I listens right hard. By Gum! that day he tuk the stiffenin' out'n Old Hickory! Surely, surely he did! Ef I thought I war never a-goin' ter hear Old Hickory's name agin I'd tune up my ears fur the angel's quirin'. I was born a Republikin'; I growed ter be a good Whig an' I'll die a Republikin. Ef that aint religion I dunno what air! That's the way I hev lived an' walked afore the Lord. An' hyar in the evenin' o' my days I hev got ter set alongside o' this hyar old cansarn an' hear him jow about'n Old Hickory from morning to night. Ef I had

knowed how he war goin' ter turn out bout'n Old Hickory in his las' days I wouldn't hev let my darter marry his son, thirty-five years ago. I knowed he war a Dummycrat but I never knowed the stren'th o' the failin' till I war called on ter 'sperunce it." (Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains, p. 87.)

I ought never to try to read these dialect stories as so much of their force is lost if one cannot make some attempt at rendering them true to life, but the necessity of my narrative compels me to give another. As an advocate of Henry Clay has been heard, it is proper now that we should hear from an adherent of Andrew Jackson, but before he takes the stump it will be worth our while to refresh our memory concerning the Battle of New Orleans, which was fought on January 8, 1815. Eight thousand disciplined British troops, well-officered, well-equipped, largely Peninsula veterans, confident in themselves and their commander had been sent across the water to take New Orleans. Their commander was Pakenham, a brother-in-law of Wellington, and Wellington believed such a force competent to capture New Orleans or to rout any American army he ever heard of. On this 8th day of January, the British forces attacked the American earth works behind which were 4,000 to 4,500 motley troops, but magnificent marksmen, backswoodsmen, Indian fighters, under the command of Andrew Jackson. The rout of the British was complete, their commander was killed and their loss was 2,036 while the American casualties were but 71. I must add that it was the popular though erroneous belief that Jackson and his men fought behind cotton bales. This battle pushed Jackson to the fore, made him a great figure in American politics, the leader and dictator of the Democratic party and president for two terms. The 8th of January is still celebrated by the Democrats as Saint Jackson's day.

We are now ready to hear from the orator who was running for the office of constable in a town in the Southwest; "Whar, my enlightened friends of the hundred and

sixty-sixth militia district," asked the stump orator, "was Dan'l Webster in the battle of Noo Orleenes? He wur nowhar. He wur a livin' down to Bosting in a brown stone house with a marble facade out of the Quincy quarries, a drawin' of cheques on Nicholas Biddle's Bank and nary darn cent of 'em paid when they com' doo. That's whar he wur. And Henry Clay, my enlightened friends of the Hundred Sixty-Sixth Militia district? Wur he ter the battle of Noo Orleanes? He wurnt. He wur a woggulatin' from Paris to Vienna a playin' of draw poker with all the princes and potentates of Europe and nary an ace in the pack. That's whar he wur. *But,* my enlightened friends, whar wur Andrew Jackson? Wur he ter the battle of Noo Orleenes? He wur. He wur a ridin' up and down on a bobtail Arabian out of Eclipse, a wavin' of a crooked sabre, up to his armpits in blood and mud, and a givin' of the British thunder; the Genius of his Country a holding of her aegis over his head, cotton bales paravenerring in front to pertect him from every danger and the Great American Eagle with the stars and stripes in her beak, a soarin' aloft in the blue empyrean, cryin' 'Hail Columbia!' He wur thar and I wur with him." (Sala's "Diary in America," vol. 2, p. 108).

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