

# Evening Ledger



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## HOW AMERICA HAS PUT IDEALISM INTO ITS NATIVE FUN-MAKING

A Comedian and Playwright of the True Yankee School Analyzes the Most Distinctly American of American Arts

By WILLIAM HODGE

THERE is a distinctive brand of American humor, and it can be recognized by one peculiar feature. American humor, more than the humor of any other nation, is a linking of earthly shrewdness and worldly wisdom with high idealism. This may not be always apparent to those who see only the incongruous and ludicrous aspects of this humor. Nevertheless, I believe this element of truth behind laughter exists in all genuine American humor from Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Trumbull and Washington Irving down to Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, Bret Harte and Mark Twain. I will also include George Ade and Mr. Dooley. Booth Tarkington exemplified it in my now-famous character of Daniel Voorhees Pike in "The Man from Home." It is the essential feature of Jim Whitman in "The Road to Happiness." In fact, Whitman always makes me think of the youthful Abraham Lincoln in his mingled humor and honesty.

It was a great American humorist, Josh Billings—a man that tried to simplify American spelling before Andrew Carnegie—who said: "Humor must be based on truth." It is because a thing is ludicrous and at the same time true to nature that people laugh at it." And this cheerful humorist declared, in his own peculiar language: "Anatomically considered, laughing is the sensation of peeling good all over, and showing it principally in one spot. Morally considered, it is the next best thing to the Ten Commandments." Some of his (Henry W. Shaw's) own sayings are fine examples of his definition, as when he remarks, "Flattery is like kolone water, tew be smelt ov, not swallowed," or "There is a grate deal ov what is called virtue that 's nothing more than vice tired out."

From the days of Benjamin Franklin with his "Poor Richard's Almanac," begun in 1733, down to my present foot-light character of Jim Whitman, the American laugh-maker who puts his wisdom in the form of wit seems to exhibit a knack for making proverbs. Lincoln had this faculty as much as Franklin. Lincoln's great rival, Douglas, declared of Lincoln: "Abe is full of droll, dry jokes, but he is as honest as he is shrewd." It is this honesty and shrewdness in American humor that imparts its peculiar national tang. Whitman's droll sayings are as humanly inspiring as the old maxims of "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch." That old lady of Alice Hegon Rice's creation represented, indeed, the very spirit of American optimism—a spirit which Daniel Pike also represented in a lesser and Jim Whitman now represents in a greater degree. Cheerfulness is the keynote of the best American humor as well as its essential truthfulness. Washington Irving told about the ne'er-do-well of the Catskills, Rip Van Winkle, and also of Ichabod Crane in this spirit of kindly cheerfulness, thus making both of them delightful figures. Franklin thus wrote his famous "Autobiography."

Artemus Ward is a striking example of the typical American character as exemplified in odd dialect or queerly spelt humor and with Josh Billings and Petroleum V. Nasby (David Locke) he consti-

tutes a unique trio of this type. Extravagance is also a necessary element of the most characteristic native humor, a trait particularly met with in the sayings of Abraham Lincoln. His debates are filled full of these peculiar examples of extravagances, as when he described the argument of an opponent as "being as thin as the homeopathic soup that was made by

## ARE THE MOVIES DANGEROUS TRASH OR A GREAT ART IN ITS INFANCY?

Walter Prichard Eaton Attacks the Photoplay, While the Evening Ledger's Critic Comes to Its Defense

TRASH, says Walter Prichard Eaton, that's all the photoplay amounts to. The foremost dramatic critic of America goes farther. Writing in the Boston Transcript, he says: "I refuse to admit that a diet of trash for 10,000,000 Americans daily is in any sense a blessing. Personally, I believe that the movies are much more a menace than a blessing, and

the movies," he writes, "I don't want to feel that something in my make-up (or something not in my make-up) prevents me from enjoying that which gives I don't know how many millions of my fellow countrymen infinite satisfaction. \* \* \* Still am I bored by the movies. Alas! there is something the matter with me."

Mr. Eaton's disgust with the movies, the honest distaste of dozens of intelligent people, is undoubtedly a matter of physical and mental disposition. You like the movies—or you don't. Mechanism repels some people, just as surely as it entrances others. You like the miraculous marvel of the cinema. You thrill each time at the fascination of life drawn out of a white screen and a black box. Added to that primary and eternal miracle, you like the secondary miracles that the movies accomplish; you like the physical presence of other lands, of strange seas, of tremendous wrecks and disasters as backgrounds to the human. You like the plain, unvarnished "thrills" of the movies. You like their beauties. And to dig into high-brow matters of esthetics—you like the play of the directors and actors and photoplaywrights' technique within the limits and possibilities of a new art-form. Or you don't.

Mr. Eaton doesn't. Even that esthetic problem can't touch him. Indeed, the big trouble behind this question of disposition lies right there. Mr. Eaton and his friends haven't sought the thing that the movies can give—a purely esthetic, un-intellectual pleasure. They are looking for what they seek in the drama, meaning, content, the Apollonian. And they are looking for it in the movies a thousand times harder than they ever looked for it in the American drama. "The rank and file of pictures," says Mr. Eaton, "are the cheapest and most conventional sort of farcical or melodramatic or sentimental trash, exactly on a par with the stories in such papers as the old Fireside Companion." When, I may be pardoned for asking, has Mr. Eaton ever found more than "farcical or melodramatic or sentimental trash" in the plots of the majority of the big American successes of the last 10 years? Occasionally a little characterization or the pleasure of acting has vitalized them. But has it vitalized them any more than the esthetic qualities of the film have vitalized the movie plots?

Mr. Eaton is making the mistake of many photoplay producers. He is looking in the movies for the intellectual qualities of the drama; they are trying to put into an alien medium dramas that have only the advertising value of their names to commend them as screen vehicles. The managers should make up their minds once and for all that they are handling a new, romantic narrative, art, and give up all this fishing from the stage. And Mr. Eaton should learn to look for the remarkable new esthetic elements of the photoplay art.

Farrar's "Carmen" show, clearly enough what the movies can do. First of all they can render pantomime action on their great screens as the stage never can.

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## WHEN THE STARS WERE YOUNG



*from Ruth*

When Ruth Chatterton was six years old she thought the operatic stage her destination. And she was also precocious enough to have a hand-made signature.

### VERBAL PEBBLES ON "ROAD TO HAPPINESS"

You can't fight trouble with tears; tears help trouble just the way water helps flowers.

Let 'em roast. While they're roasting me, they're letting somebody else cool off. You know our postmaster carried a letter of mine around with him for two weeks once. He believes that what you don't know won't worry you.

If a girl is bad you don't have to tell people. They'll find it out before the girl does.

If anybody in this town runs a sliver in their finger, old Ben Hardcastle will accuse him of stealing a boardwalk.

Old Father Time is the only sure-fire detective in the world.

Squeeze your mind and press on your heart and see what your tongue will do.

boiling the shadow of a pigeon that had starved to death." Sam Slick and other typical Yankee characters all possess this sort of extreme humor. We have heard of one orator who said of another political stump speaker: "He may have a conscience, but he can blow it through the quill of a humming bird into the eye of a mosquito." Jim Whitman in "The Road to Happiness" has the same sort of humor when he says: "If anybody in this town runs a sliver in their finger, old Ben Hardcastle will accuse him of stealing a boardwalk."

that when we boast that their manufacture is the fourth industry in the United States, we ought to boast with a blush."

Mr. Eaton, you see, had been looking upon Cyril Maude in "Peer Gynt." He had reckoned up as true photoplay art that ill-begotten parody, with its stuffed reindeer on rockers; he hadn't waited for such a film as Farrar's "Carmen" to take as a point of departure. If he had, the answer might have been different.

But only "might have." For deep down inside, Mr. Eaton admits that it may be a case of a "blind spot." "I want to enjoy

### "THE FOLLIES OF 480 B. C."

I sometimes wonder if Sappho—really drew big houses to the Dionysian Theatre at the foot of the Acropolis. Since the theatre in Athens was something in the nature of a religious institution, I assume that the attendance was very much what it is in the churches today, say one-fifth capacity. And these solemn hieratic dance-figures which Isadora Duncan has copied from the vase must have bored the young people immensely. I suspect that the younger set at Athens preferred the new Persian dances as introduced by the wallers in the wine shops of the Piræus. I suspect that the audiences at the theatre of Dionysos consisted mainly of sightseeing visitors from Bœotia, and of high school pupils whose descendants now go to see Robert Mantell. I suspect there were empty seats at the "Oedipus Rex" and the "Hæcuba" when "The Girl From Ninveh" came to town. — Simon Strunsky.