

of Spanish humour and which, since it was translated into English 300 years ago has been almost as great a favourite in this country as in its native land.

In France the people are frivolous and gay by nature, as fond of amusement as children, and quick to go from one extreme to another. A Frenchman's own definition of wit describes it as "a fusion of smiles and tears," but if we may take Talleyrand's famous *bon mot* as an example of their wit I think we shall find it quite equal to anything we can produce, and if we compare their humour with that of their neighbours in Holland and Belgium, what a difference we shall find.

In the Netherlands, wit, though ponderous and slow, is withal kindly, and shows their sympathies are deep and true.

Russian wit, owing to the difficulties its language presents, is little known other than in Russia, where it is justly popular. The humour in many of their writers is both artistic and deep for they possess the unique gift of bringing to the surface the comical traits in men's characters and portraying them both lightly and cleverly.

Italian wit is insidious and deep, but we could not call it either witty or amusing.

It is to the Spanish peninsula that we owe that trite, although poetical, saying: "The way to hell is paved with good intentions" and they have another true and sensible saying which says that "The street of by-and-by leads to the house of never." The politeness and polish of the Italian race suddenly disappear when they tell a man: "When tired of a quiet life, take unto himself a wife"—and many more in the same strain.

But still the humour of most of these nations can easily be traced through their rich and ancient stock of fables and proverbs, and I know of no wiser proverb, with its keen insight into human nature, than this which is to be found in both Arabia and Persia:

*He that knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is asleep!
He that knows, and knows not that he knows, is a fool,
He that knows not, and knows that he knows not, hath the beginning
of wisdom.*

But he that knows and knows that he knows, is a wise man.

Now because most of the instances I have given you so far have been of modern times, you must not be under the impression that wit and humour are things of modern growth, or that the ancients were not quite as fond of laughter in their lives as we are. Records of ancient history show that there were many noted wits and humorous writers in those days, tho' for centuries satire and ridicule were their chief points. Even now to classical readers the names of Aristophanes and Lucian and Martial are quite as well known as are the names of Rabelais and Molière in France, or Sheridan and Goldsmith here. It was only through their caustic wit that the wholesome medicine of reproof could be administered to the magnates of the dark ages.

But of course what was wit to a Greek or Roman cannot necessarily have the same amount of significance to us, for it is bound to have lost somewhat even with the most careful translation, for wit and humour are often closely allied with the soil where they are born, and will scarcely bear transplanting to other times and places, and again the question of their quality may be a matter of taste. But because their wit is not quite to our liking or understanding, that is no grounds for our overlooking it altogether. Many of the old Greek proverbs were exceedingly clever, for not only did they contain wit, but a large share of wisdom and practical common sense as well! And long before the days of the Greeks and Romans our rude forefathers felt the need for laughter in their lives and out of this need was evolved a race of laughter-makers called jesters whose occupation it was to while away the leisure hours of the rich

and the great with every possible sort of witty conceit and merriment. In the Middle Ages every court, whether secular or ecclesiastical, had its jester or buffoon as a necessary appendage, tho' often the position of these jesters meant *acting* a fool rather than *being* one, for as often as not they were clever, shrewd, and sensible men with the faculty of observation largely developed, and these men were a great deal more than mere merry-andrews for it was only through their caustic wit that the wholesome medicine of reproof was administered to the magnates of the dark ages, and they were the chartered censors of even royalty itself until the licence of the fool developed into the liberty of the Press. And these jesters must have been of very ancient origin for we read in heathen mythology that it was the province of Momus, their jester, to excite the faculties of the gods themselves, and Homer speaks of Venus as being a "Laughter-loving Queen," and they are mentioned in the histories of all nations from the earliest days of antiquity down to the time of the Commonwealth. But with the advent of printing and the growth and spread of civilisation and learning, a new era commenced which was rather that of solidity than fancy and more serious matters were forced upon the attention of the nations, and with our present, rushing lives, jesters have almost disappeared, for worry and troubles generally follow in the steps of civilisation and learning. And, O the pity of it! Many a rancorous political meeting or quarrelsome county council might become like Mrs. Fezziwig, one "vast substantial smile," if they could be stirred by the jokes of the jesters as well as accompanied by the prayers of the chaplains.

Even rare Ben Jonson has told us that:

*Fools are the only nation worthy of
Men's admiration!*

And now to leave the days of antiquity behind us and to come once more to modern times, for there is another race of people with a large, diversified class of laughter-makers that I must mention here—I mean the Americans. In the early days of this nation the rigid discipline and gloomy tenets of the Puritans and Quakers enforced a grave and staid outlook and habits which ill-accorded with gaiety and humour, but nature is stronger than regulations and however much they might subdue and restrain their manners, conversation or dress, they could not banish mirth from their hearts, and after nearly 200 years of hibernating, this prolific and hardy plant sprang once more to birth with renewed energy and vigour and in variety and abundance everywhere.

The older works of many American authors have deservedly achieved a universal popularity, for taken on the whole there is very much cleverness in many of their writings in which they combine pure fun and broad humour, with both cuteness and intelligence.

We laugh at the one, we admire the other, even though it is often allied to satire, and for this reason we call their wit incisive and speak of its edge, its point, its keenness, but then it partakes largely of the intellectual bent and character of the people. And all through their homely wording and uncouth diction, there run vivid flashes of humour caused by a droll system of exaggeration and grotesque expressions which may almost be considered as entirely American and which show they possess an original wit, in spite of their being such matter-of-fact people, generally with an eye to the main chance. Indeed the charm of many American authors depends largely on their language and if this were stripped of its racy idioms it would lose much of its attractiveness; especially when we reflect that most languages are apt to lose in vigour and forcibility if too highly polished.

Among their past writers none has been better liked or more appreciated in this country than Artemus Ward,

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