

Sanborn Kate

The Wit of Women



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Sanborn Kate K.

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The Wit of Women / Fourth Edition

PROEM.¹

We are coming to the rescue,
Just a hundred strong;
With fun and pun and epigram,
And laughter, wit, and song;
With badinage and repartee,
And humor quaint or bold,
And stories that *are* stories,
Not several æons old;

With parody and nondescript,
Burlesque and satire keen,
And irony and playful jest,
So that it may be seen
That women are not quite so dull:
We come – a merry throng;
Yes, we're coming to the rescue,
And just a hundred strong.

Kate Sanborn.

¹ *Not Poem!*

CHAPTER I

THE MELANCHOLY TONE OF WOMEN'S POETRY – PUNS, GOOD AND BAD – EPIGRAMS AND LACONICS – CYNICISM OF FRENCH WOMEN – SENTENCES CRISP AND SPARKLING

To begin a deliberate search for wit seems almost like trying to be witty: a task quite certain to brush the bloom from even the most fruitful results. But the statement of Richard Grant White, that humor is the "rarest of qualities in woman," roused such a host of brilliant recollections that it was a temptation to try to materialize the ghosts that were haunting me; to lay forever the suspicion that they did not exist. Two articles by Alice Wellington Rollins in the *Critic*, on "Woman's Sense of Humor" and "The Humor of Women," convinced me that the deliberate task might not be impossible to carry out, although I felt, as she did, that the humor and wit of women are difficult to analyze, and select examples, precisely because they possess in the highest degree that almost essential quality of wit, the unpremeditated glow which exists only with the occasion that calls it forth. Even from the humor of women found in books it is hard to quote – not because there is so little, but because there is so much.

The encouragement to attempt this novel enterprise of proving ("by their fruits ye shall know them") that women are not deficient in either wit or humor has not been great. Wise librarians have, with a smile, regretted the paucity of proper material; literary men have predicted rather a thin volume; in short, the general opinion of men is condensed in the sly question of a peddler who comes to our door, summer and winter, his stock varying with the season: sage-cheese and home-made socks, suspenders and cheap note-paper, early-rose potatoes and the solid pearmain. This shrewd old fellow remarked roguishly "You're gittin' up a book, I see, 'baout women's wit. 'Twon't be no great of an undertakin', will it?" The outlook at first was certainly discouraging. In Parton's "Collection of Humorous Poetry" there was not one woman's name, nor in Dodd's large volume of epigrams of all ages, nor in any of the humorous departments of volumes of selected poetry.

Griswold's "Female Poets of America" was next examined. The general air of gloom – hopeless gloom – was depressing. Such mawkish sentimentality and despair; such inane and mortifying confessions; such longings for a lover to come; such sighings over a lover departed; such cravings for "only" – "only" a *grave* in some dark, dank solitude. As Mrs. Dodge puts it, "Pegasus generally feels inclined to pace toward a graveyard the moment he feels a side-saddle on his back."

The subjects of their lucubrations suggest Lady Montagu's famous speech: "There was only one reason she was glad she was a woman: she should never have to *marry* one."

From the "Female Poets" I copy this "Song," representing the average woman's versifying as regards buoyancy and an optimistic view of this "Wale of Tears":

"Ask not from me the sportive jest,
The mirthful jibe, the gay reflection;
These social baubles fly the breast
That owns the sway of pale Dejection.

"Ask not from me the changing smile,
Hope's sunny glow, Joy's glittering token;
It cannot now my griefs beguile —
My soul is dark, my heart is broken!

"Wit cannot cheat my heart of woe,
Flattery wakes no exultation;
And Fancy's flash but serves to show
The darkness of my desolation!

"By me no more in masking guise
Shall thoughtless repartee be spoken;
My mind a hopeless ruin lies —
My soul is dark, my heart is broken!"

In recalling the witty women of the world, I must surely go back, familiar as is the story, to the Grecian dame who, when given some choice old wine in a tiny glass by her miserly host, who boasted of the years since it had been bottled, inquired, "Isn't it very small of its age?"

This ancient story is too much in the style of the male story-monger – you all know him – who repeats with undiminished gusto for the forty-ninth time a story that was tottering in senile imbecility when Methuselah was teething, and is now in a sad condition of *anecdote*.

It is affirmed that "women seldom repeat an anecdote." That is well, and no proof of their lack of wit. The discipline of life would be largely increased if they did insist on being "reminded" constantly of anecdotes as familiar as the hand-organ repertoire of "Captain Jinks" and "Beautiful Spring." Their sense of humor is too keen to allow them to aid these aged wanderers in their endless migrations. It is sufficiently trying to their sense of the ludicrous to be obliged to listen with an admiring, rapt expression to some anecdote heard in childhood, and restrain the laugh until the oft-repeated crisis has been duly reached. Still, I know several women who, as brilliant *raconteurs*, have fully equalled the efforts of celebrated after-dinner wits.

It is also affirmed that "women cannot make a pun," which, if true, would be greatly to their honor. But, alas! their puns are almost as frequent and quite as execrable as are ever perpetrated. It was Queen Elizabeth who said: "Though ye be burly, my Lord Burleigh, ye make less stir than my Lord Leicester."

Lady Morgan, the Irish novelist, witty and captivating, who wrote "Kate Kearney" and the "Wild Irish Girl," made several good puns. Some one, speaking of the laxity of a certain bishop in regard to Lenten fasting, said: "I believe he would eat a horse on Ash Wednesday." "And very proper diet," said her ladyship, "if it were a *fast* horse."

Her special enemy, Croker, had declared that Wellington's success at Waterloo was only a fortunate accident, and intimated that he could have done better himself, under similar circumstances. "Oh, yes," exclaimed her ladyship, "he had his secret for winning the battle. He had only to put his notes on Boswell's Johnson in front of the British lines, and all the Bonapartes that ever existed could never *get through* them!"

"Grace Greenwood" has probably made more puns in print than any other woman, and her conversation is full of them. It was Grace Greenwood who, at a tea-drinking at the Woman's Club in Boston, was begged to tell one more story, but excused herself in this way: "No, I cannot get more than one story high on a cup of tea!"

You see puns are allowed at that rarely intellectual assemblage – indeed, they are sometimes *very* bad; as when the question was brought up whether better speeches could be made after simple tea and toast, or under the influence of champagne and oysters. Miss Mary Wadsworth replied that it would depend entirely upon whether the oysters were cooked or raw; and seeing all look blank, she explained: "Because, if raw, we should be sure to have a raw-oyster-ing time."

Louisa Alcott's puns deserve "honorable mention." I will quote one. "Query – If steamers are named the Asia, the Russia, and the Scotia, why not call one the *Nausea*?"

At a Chicago dinner-party a physician received a menu card with the device of a mushroom, and showing it to the lady next him, said: "I hope nothing invidious is intended." "Oh, no," was the answer, "it only alludes to the fact that you spring up in the night."

A gentleman, noticeable on the porch of the sanctuary as the pretty girls came in on Sabbath mornings, but *not* regarded as a devout attendant on the services within, declared that he was one of the "pillars of the church!" "Pillar-sham, I am inclined to think," was the retort of a lady friend.

To a lady who, in reply to a gentleman's assertion that women sometimes made a good pun, but required time to think about it, had said that *she* could make a pun as quickly as any man, the gentleman threw down this challenge: "Make a pun, then, on horse-shoe." "If you talk until you're horse-shoe can't convince me," was the instant answer.

The best punning poem from a woman's pen was written by Miss Caroline B. Le Row, of Brooklyn, N.Y., a teacher of elocution, and the writer of many charming stories and verses. It was suggested by a study in butter of "The Dreaming Iolanthe," moulded by Caroline S. Brooks on a kitchen-table, and exhibited at the Centennial in Philadelphia. I do not remember any other poem in the language that rings so many changes on a single word. It was published first in *Baldwin's Monthly*, but ran the rounds of the papers all over the country.

I

"One of the Centennial buildings
Shows us many a wondrous thing
Which the women of our country
From their homes were proud to bring.
In a little corner, guarded
By Policeman Twenty-eight,
Stands a crowd, all eyes and elbows,
Seeing butter butter-plate

II

"'Tis not 'butter faded flower'
That the people throng to see,
Butter crowd comes every hour,
Nothing butter crowd we see.
Butter little pushing brings us
Where we find, to our surprise,
That within the crowded corner
Butter dreaming woman lies.

III

"Though she lies, she don't deceive us,
As it might at first be thought;

This fair maid is made of butter,
On a kitchen-table wrought.
Nothing butter butter-paddle,
Sticks and straws were used to bring
Out of just nine pounds of butter
Butter fascinating thing.

IV

"Butter maid or made of butter,
She is butter wonder rare;
Butter sweet eyes closed in slumber,
Butter soft and yellow hair,
Were the work of butter woman
Just two thousand miles away;
Butter fortune's in the features
That she made in butter stay.

V

"Maid of all work, maid of honor,
Whatsoever she may be,
She is butter wondrous worker,
As the crowd can plainly see.
And 'tis butter woman shows us
What with butter can be done,
Nothing butter hands producing
Something new beneath the sun.

VI

"Butter line we add in closing,
Which none butter could refuse:
May her work be butter pleasure,
Nothing butter butter use;
May she never need for butter,
Though she'll often knead for bread,
And may every churning bring her
Butter blessing on her head."

The second and last example is much more common in its form, but is just as good as most of the verses of this style in Parton's "Humorous Poetry." I don't pretend that it is remarkable, but it is equally worthy of presentation with many efforts of this sort from men with a reputation for wit.

THE VEGETABLE GIRL

BY MAY TAYLOR

Behind a market-stall installed,
I mark it every day,
Stands at her stand the fairest girl
I've met within the bay;
Her two lips are of cherry red,
Her hands a pretty pair,
With such a charming turn-up nose,
And lovely reddish hair.

'Tis there she stands from morn till night,
Her customers to please,
And to appease their appetite
She sells them beans and peas.
Attracted by the glances from
The apple of her eye,
And by her Chili apples, too,
Each passer-by will buy.

She stands upon her little feet
Throughout the livelong day,
And sells her celery and things —
A big feat, by the way.
She changes off her stock for change,
Attending to each call;
And when she has but one beet left,
She says, "Now, that beats all."

As to puns in conversation, my only fear is that they are too generally indulged in. Only one of this sort can be allowed, and that from the highest lady in the land, who is distinguished for culture and good sense, as well as wit. A friend said to her as she was leaving Buffalo for Washington: "I hope you will hail from Buffalo."

"Oh, I see you expect me to hail from Buffalo and reign in Washington," said the quick-witted sister of our President.

In epigrams there is little to offer. But as it is stated that "women cannot achieve a well-rounded epigram," a few specimens must be produced.

Jane Austen has left two on record. The first was suggested by reading in a newspaper the marriage of a Mr. Gell to Miss Gill, of Eastborne.

"At Eastborne, Mr. Gell, from being perfectly well,
Became dreadfully ill for love of Miss Gill;
So he said, with some sighs, 'I'm the slave of your iis;
Oh, restore, if you please, by accepting my ees.'"

The second is on the marriage of a middle-aged flirt with a Mr. Wake, whom gossips averred she would have scorned in her prime.

"Maria, good-humored and handsome and tall,
For a husband was at her last stake;
And having in vain danced at many a ball,
Is now happy to jump at a Wake."

It was Lady Townsend who said that the human race was divided into men, women, and *Herveys*. This epigram has been borrowed in our day, substituting for *Herveys* the *Beecher* family.

When some one said of a lady she must be in spirits, for she lives with Mr. Walpole, "Yes," replied Lady Townsend, "spirits of hartshorn."

Walpole, caustic and critical, regarded this lady as undeniably witty.

It was Hannah More who said: "There are but two bad things in this world – sin and bile."

Miss Thackeray quotes several epigrammatic definitions from her friend Miss Evans, as:

"A privileged person: one who is so much a savage when thwarted that civilized persons avoid thwarting him."

"A musical woman: one who has strength enough to make much noise and obtuseness enough not to mind it."

"Ouida" has given us some excellent examples of epigram, as:

"A pipe is a pocket philosopher, a truer one than Socrates, for it never asks questions. Socrates must have been very tiresome, when one thinks of it."

"Dinna ye meddle, Tam; it's niver no good a threshin' other folks' corn; ye allays gits the flail agin' i' yer own eye somehow."

"Epigrams are the salts of life; but they wither up the grasses of foolishness, and naturally the grasses hate to be sprinkled therewith."

"A man never is so honest as when he speaks well of himself. Men are always optimists when they look inward, and pessimists when they look round them."

"Nothing is so pleasant as to display your worldly wisdom in epigram and dissertation, but it is a trifle tedious to hear another person display theirs."

"When you talk yourself you think how witty, how original, how acute you are; but when another does so, you are very apt to think only, 'What a crib from Rochefoucauld!'"

"Boredom is the ill-natured pebble that always *will* get in the golden slipper of the pilgrim of pleasure."

"It makes all the difference in life whether hope is left or – left out!"

"A frog that dwelt in a ditch spat at a worm that bore a lamp.

"'Why do you do that?' said the glow-worm.

"'Why do you shine?' said the frog."

"Calumny is the homage of our contemporaries, as some South Sea Islanders spit on those they honor."

"Hived bees get sugar because they will give back honey. All existence is a series of equivalents."

"'Men are always like Horace,' said the Princess. 'They admire rural life, but they remain, for all that, with Augustus.'"

"If the Venus de Medici could be animated into life, women would only remark that her waist was large."

The brilliant Frenchwomen whose very names seem to sparkle as we write them, yet of whose wit so little has been preserved, had an especial facility for condensed cynicism.

Think of Madame du Deffand, sceptical, sarcastic; feared and hated even in her blind old age for her scathing criticisms. When the celebrated work of Helvetius appeared he was blamed in her presence for having made selfishness the great motive of human action.

"Bah!" said she, "he has only revealed every one's secret."

And listen to this trio of laconics, with their saddening knowledge of human frailty and their bitter Voltaireish flavor:

We shall all be perfectly virtuous when there is no longer any flesh on our bones. —*Marguerite de Valois*.

We like to know the weakness of eminent persons; it consoles us for our inferiority. —*Mme. de Lambert*.

Women give themselves to God when the devil wants nothing more to do with them. —*Sophie Arnould*.

Madame de Sévigné's letters present detached thoughts worthy of Rochefoucauld without his cynicism. She writes: "One loves so much to talk of one's self that one never tires of a *tête-à-tête* with a lover for years. That is the reason that a devotee likes to be with her confessor. It is for the pleasure of talking of one's self – even though speaking evil." And she remarks to a lady who amused her friends by always going into mourning for some prince, or duke, or member of some royal family, and who at last appeared in bright colors, "Madame, I congratulate myself on the health of Europe."

I find, too, many fine aphorisms from "Carmen Sylva" (Queen of Roumania):

"Il vaut mieux avoir pour confesseur un médecin qu'un prêtre. Vous dites au prêtre que vous détestez les hommes, il vous réponds que vous n'êtes pas chrétien. Le médecin vous donne de la rhubarbe, et voilà que vous aimez votre semblable."

"Vous dites au prêtre que vous êtes fatigué de vivre; il vous réponds que le suicide est un crime. Le médecin vous donne un stimulant, et voilà que vous trouvez la vie supportable."

"La contradiction anime la conversation; voilà pourquoi les cours sont si ennuyeuses."

"Quand on veut affirmer quelque chose, on appelle toujours Dieu à témoin, parce qu'il ne contredit jamais."

"On ne peut jamais être fatigué de la vie, on n'est fatigué que de soi-même."

"Il faut être ou très-pieux ou très-philosophe! il faut dire: Seigneur, que ta volonté soit faite! ou: Nature, j'admets tes lois, même lorsqu'elles m'écrasent."

"L'homme est un violon. Ce n'est que lorsque sa dernière corde se brise qu'il devient un morceau de bois."

In the recently published sketch of Madame Mohl there are several sentences which show trenchant wit, as: "Nations squint in looking at one another; we must discount what Germany and France say of each other."

Several Englishwomen can be recalled who were noted for their epigrammatic wit: as Harriet, Lady Ashburton. On some one saying that liars generally speak good-naturedly of others, she replied: "Why, if you don't speak a word of truth, it is not so difficult to speak well of your neighbor."

"Don't speak so hardly of – , " some one said to her; "he lives on your good graces."

"That accounts," she answered, "for his being so thin."

Again: "I don't mind the canvas of a man's mind being good, if only it is completely hidden by the worsted and floss."

Or: "She never speaks to any one, which is, of course, a great advantage to any one."

Mrs. Carlyle *was* an epigram herself – small, sweet, yet possessing a sting – and her letters give us many sharp and original sayings.

She speaks in one place of "Mrs. – , an insupportable bore; her neck and arms were as naked as if she had never eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

And what a comical phrase is hers when she writes to her "Dearest" – "I take time by the *pig-tail* and write at night, after post-hours" – that growling, surly "dearest," of whom she said, "The amount of bile that he brings home is awfully grand."

For a veritable epigram from an American woman's pen we must rely on Hannah F. Gould, who wrote many verses that were rather graceful and arch than witty. But her epitaph on her friend, the active and aggressive Caleb Cushing, is as good as any made by Saxe.

"Lay aside, all ye dead,
For in the next bed
Reposes the body of Cushing;
He has crowded his way
Through the world, they say,
And even though dead will be pushing."

Such a hit from a bright woman is refreshing.

Our literary foremothers seemed to prefer to be pedantic, didactic, and tedious on the printed page.

Catharine Sedgwick dealt somewhat in epigram, as when she says: "He was not one of those convenient single people who are used, as we use straw and cotton in packing, to fill up vacant places."

Eliza Leslie (famed for her cook-books and her satiric sketches), when speaking of people silent from stupidity, supposed kindly to be full of reserved power, says: "We cannot help thinking that when a head is full of ideas some of them must involuntarily *ooze* out."

And is not this epigrammatic advice? "Avoid giving invitations to bores – they will come without."

Some of our later literary women prefer the epigrammatic form in sentences, crisp and laconic; short sayings full of pith, of which I have made a collection.

Gail Hamilton's books fairly bristle with epigrams in condensed style, and Kate Field has many a good thought in this shape, as: "Judge no one by his relations, whatever criticism you pass upon his companions. Relations, like features, are thrust upon us; companions, like clothes, are more or less our own selection."

Miss Jewett's style is less epigrammatic, but just as full of humor. Speaking of a person who was always complaining, she says: "Nothing ever suits her. She ain't had no more troubles to bear than the rest of us; but you never see her that she didn't have a chapter to lay before ye. I've got 's much feelin' as the next one, but when folks drives in their spiggits and wants to draw a bucketful o' compassion every day right straight along, there does come times when it seems as if the bar'l was getting low."

"The captain, whose eyes were not much better than his ears, always refused to go forth after nightfall without his lantern. The old couple steered slowly down the uneven sidewalk toward their cousin's house. The captain walked with a solemn, rolling gait, learned in his many long years at sea, and his wife, who was also short and stout, had caught the habit from him. If they kept step all went well; but on this occasion, as sometimes happened, they did not take the first step out into the world together, so they swayed apart, and then bumped against each other as they went along. To see the lantern coming through the mist you might have thought it the light of a small craft at sea in heavy weather."

"Deaf people hear more things that are worth listening to than people with better ears; one likes to have something worth telling in talking to a person who misses most of the world's talk."

"Emory Ann," a creation of Mrs. Whitney's, often spoke in epigrams, as: "Good looks are a snare; especially to them that haven't got 'em." While Mrs. Walker's creed, "I believe in the total depravity of inanimate things," is more than an epigram – it is an inspiration.

Charlotte Fiske Bates, who compiled the "Cambridge Book of Poetry," and has given us a charming volume of her own verses, which no one runs any "Risk" in buying, in spite of the title of the book, has done a good deal in this direction, and is fond of giving an epigrammatic turn to a bright thought, as in the following couplet:

"Would you sketch in two words a coquette and deceiver?
Name two Irish geniuses, Lover and Lever!"

She also succeeds with the quatrain:

ON BEING CALLED A GOOSE

A signal name is this, upon my word!
Great Juno's geese saved Rome her citadel.
Another drowsy Manlius may be stirred
And the State saved, if I but cackle well.

I recall a charming *jeu d'esprit* from Mrs. Barrows, the beloved "Aunt Fanny," who writes equally well for children and grown folks, and whose big heart ranges from earnest philanthropy to the perpetration of exquisite nonsense.

It is but a trifle, sent with a couple of peanut-owls to a niece of Bryant's. The aged poet was greatly amused.

"When great Minerva chose the Owl,
That bird of solemn phiz,
That truly awful-looking fowl,
To represent her wisdom,
Dom, little recked the goddess of
The time when she would howl
To see a Peanut set on end,
And called – Minerva's Owl."

Miss Phelps has given us some sentences which convey an epigram in a keen and delicate fashion, as:

"All forms of self-pity, like Prussian blue, should be sparingly used."

"As a rule, a man can't cultivate his mustache and his talents impartially."

"As happy as a kind-hearted old lady with a funeral to go to."

"No men are so fussy about what they eat as those who think their brains the biggest part of them."

"The professor's sister, a homeless widow, of excellent Vermont intentions and high ideals in cup-cake."

And this longer extract has the same characteristics:

"You know how it is with people, Avis; some take to zoölogy, and some take to religion. That's the way it is with places. It may be the Lancers, and it may be prayer-meetings. Once I went to see my grandmother in the country, and everybody had a candy-pull; there were twenty-five candy-pulls and taffy-bakes in that town that winter. John Rose says, in the Connecticut Valley, where he came from, it was missionary barrels; and I heard of a place where it was cold coffee. In Harmouth it's improving your mind. And so," added Coy, "we run to reading-clubs, and we all go fierce, winter after winter,

to see who'll get the 'severest.' There's a set outside of the faculty that descends to charades and music and inconceivably low intellectual depths; and some of our girls sneak off and get in there once in a while, like the little girl that wanted to go from heaven to hell to play Saturday afternoons, just as you and I used to do, Avis, when we dared. But I find I've got too old for that," said Coy, sadly. "When you're fairly past the college-boys, and as far along as the law students – "

"Or the theologues?" interposed Avis.

"Yes, or the theologues, or even the medical department; then there positively *is* nothing for it but to improve your mind."

Listen to Lavinia, one of Mrs. Rose Terry Cooke's sensible Yankee women:

"Land! if you want to know folks, just hire out to 'em. They take their wigs off afore the help, so to speak, seemingly."

"Marryin' a man ain't like settin' alongside of him nights and hearin' him talk pretty; that's the fust prayer. There's lots an' lots o' meetin' after that!"

And what an amount of sense, as well as wit, in Sam Lawson's sayings in "Old Town Folks." As this book is not to be as large as Worcester's Unabridged Dictionary, I can only give room to one.

"We don't none of us like to have our sins set in order afore us. There was *David*, now, he was crank as could be when he thought Nathan was a talkin' about *other* people's sins. Says David: 'The man that did that shall surely die.' But come to set it home and say, '*Thou* art the man!' David caved right in. 'Lordy massy, bless your soul and body, Nathan!' says he, 'I don't want to die.'"

And Mrs. A.D.T. Whitney must not be forgotten. "As Emory Ann said once about thoughts: 'You can't hinder 'em any more than you can the birds that fly in the air; but you needn't let 'em light and make a nest in your hair.'"

And what a capital hit on the hypocritical apologies of conceited housekeepers is this bit from Mrs. Whicher ("Widow Bedott"): "A person that didn't know how wimmin always go on at such a place would a thought that Miss Gipson had tried to have everything the miserablest she possibly could, and that the rest on 'em never had anything to hum but what was miserabler yet."

And Marietta Holley, who has caused a tidal-wave of laughter by her "Josiah Allen's Wife" series, shall have her say.

"We, too, are posterity, though mebbly we don't realize it as we ort to."

"She didn't seem to sense anything, only ruffles and such like. Her mind all seemed to be narrowed down and puckered up, just like trimmin'."

But I must have convinced the most sceptical of woman's wit in epigrammatic form, and will now return to an older generation, who claim a fair share of attention.

CHAPTER II

HUMOR OF LITERARY ENGLISHWOMEN

In reviewing the *bon-mots* of Stella, whom Swift pronounced the most witty woman he had ever known, it seems that we are improving. I will give but two of her sayings, which were so carefully preserved by her friend.

When she was extremely ill her physician said, "Madam, you are near the bottom of the hill, but we will endeavor to get you up again;" she answered: "Doctor, I fear I shall be out of breath before I get up to the top."

After she had been eating some sweet thing a little of it happened to stick on her lips. A gentleman told her of it, and offered to lick it off. She said: "No, sir, I thank you; I have a tongue of my own."

Compare these with the wit of George Eliot or the irony of Miss Phelps.

Some of Jane Taylor's stories and poems were formerly regarded as humorous; for instance, the "Discontented Pendulum" and the "Philosopher's Scales." They do not now raise the faintest smile.

Fanny Burney's novels were considered immensely humorous and diverting in their day. Burke complimented her on "her natural vein of humor," and another eminent critic speaks of "her sarcasm, drollery, and humor;" but it would be almost impossible to find a passage for quotation that would now satisfy on these points. Even Jane Austen's novels, which strangely retain their hold on the public taste, are tedious to those who dare to think for themselves and forget Macaulay's verdict.

Mrs. Barbauld, in her poem on "Washing Day," shows a capacity seldom exercised for seeing the humorous side of every-day miseries.

"Woe to the friend
Whose evil stars have urged him forth to claim
On such a day the hospitable rites!
Looks, blank at best, and stinted courtesy
Shall he receive. Vainly he feeds his hopes
With dinner of roast chicken, savory pie,
Or tart, or pudding; pudding he nor tart
That day shall eat; nor, though the husband try
Mending what can't be helped to kindle mirth
From cheer deficient, shall his consort's brow
Cheer up propitious; the unlucky guest
In silence dines, and early slinks away."

But her style is too stiff and stately for every day.

There were many literary Englishwomen who had undoubted humor. Hannah More did get unendurably poky, narrow, and solemn in her last days, and not a little sanctimonious; and we naturally think of her as an aged spinster with black mitts, corkscrew curls, and a mob cap, always writing or presenting a tedious tract, forgetting her brilliant youth, when she was quite good enough, and lively, too. She was a perennial favorite in London, meeting all the notables; the special pet of Dr. Johnson, Davy Garrick, and Horace Walpole, who called her his "holy Hannah," but admired and honored her, corresponding with her through a long life. She was then full of spirit and humor and versatile talent. An extract from her sister's lively letter shows that Hannah could hold her own with the Ursa Major of literature:

"Tuesday evening we drank tea at Sir Joshua's with Dr. Johnson. Hannah is certainly a great favorite. She was placed next him, and they had the entire conversation to themselves. They were both in remarkably high spirits. It was certainly her lucky night. I never heard her say so many good things. The old genius was extremely jocular, and the young one very pleasant. You would have imagined we had been at some comedy had you heard our peals of laughter. They, indeed, tried which could pepper the highest, and it is not clear to me that the lexicographer was really the highest seasoner."

And how deliciously does she set out the absurdity then prevailing, and seen now in editions of Shakespeare and Chaucer, of writing books, the bulk of which consists of notes, with only a line or two at the top of each page of the original text.

It seems that a merry party at Dr. Kennicott's had each adopted the name of some animal. Dr. K. was the elephant; Mrs. K., dromedary; Miss Adams, antelope; and H. More, rhinoceros.

"Hampton, December 24, 1728.

"Dear Dromy (a): Pray, send word if *Ante*(b) is come, and also how *Ele* (c) does, to your very affectionate *Rhyney*" (d).

The following notes on the above epistle are by a commentator of the latter end of the nineteenth century. This epistle is all that is come down to us of this voluminous author, and is probably the only thing she ever wrote that was worth preserving, or which might reasonably expect to reach posterity. Her name is only presented to us in some beautiful hendecasyllables written by the best Latin poet of his time (Bishop Lowth):

Note (a)

"*Dromy*.— From the termination of this address it seems to have been written to a woman, though there is no internal evidence to support this hypothesis. The best critics are much puzzled about the orthography of this abbreviation. Wartonius and other skilful etymologists contend that it ought to be spelled *drummy*, being addressed to a lady who was probably fond of warlike instruments, and who had a singular predilection for a *canon*. *Drummy*, say they, was a tender diminutive of drum, as the best authors in their more familiar writings now begin to use gunny for gun. But *Hardius*, a contemporary critic, contends, with more probability, that it ought to be written *Drome*, from hippodrome; a learned leech and elegant bard of Bath having left it on record that this lady spent much of her time at the riding-school, being a very exquisite judge of horsemanship. *Colmanus* and *Horatius Strawberryensis* insist that it ought to be written *Dromo*, in reference to the *Dromo Sorasius* of the Latin dramatist."

Note (b)

"*Ante*.— Scaliger 2d says this name simply signifies the appellation of uncle's wife, and ought to be written *Aunty*. But here, again, are various readings. Philologists of yet greater name affirm that it was meant to designate *pre-eminence*, and therefore ought to be written *ante*, before, from the Latin, a language now pretty well forgotten, though the authors who wrote in it are still preserved in French translations. The younger Madame Dacier insists that this lady was against all men, and that it ought to be spelled *anti*; but this Kennicottus, a rabbi of the most recondite learning, with much critical wrath, vehemently contradicts, affirming it to have been

impossible she could have been against mankind whom all mankind admired. He adds that ante is for *antelope*, and is emblematically used to express an elegant and slender animal, or that it is an elongation of *ant*, the *emblem of virtuous citizenship*."

And so she continues her comments to close of notes.

Mrs. Gaskell's "Cranford" is full of the most delicate but veritable humor, as her allusion to the genteel and cheerful poverty of the lady who, in giving a tea-party, "now sat in state, pretending not to know what cakes were sent up, though she knew, and we knew, and she knew that we knew; and we knew that she knew that we knew she had been busy all the morning making tea-bread and sponge-cakes."

The humor of Mary Russell Mitford, quiet and delectable, must not be forgotten. We will sympathize with her woes as she describes a visitation from

THE TALKING LADY

"Ben Jonson has a play called *The Silent Woman*, who turns out, as might be expected, to be no woman at all – nothing, as Master Slender said, but 'a great lubberly boy,' thereby, as I apprehend, discourteously presuming that a silent woman is a nonentity. If the learned dramatist, thus happily prepared and predisposed, had happened to fall in with such a specimen of female loquacity as I have just parted with, he might, perhaps, have given us a pendant to his picture in the talking lady. Pity but he had! He would have done her justice, which I could not at any time, least of all now; I am too much stunned, too much like one escaped from a belfry on a coronation day. I am just resting from the fatigue of four days' hard listening – four snowy, sleety, rainy days; days of every variety of falling weather, all of them too bad to admit the possibility that any petticoated thing, were she as hardy as a Scotch fir, should stir out; four days chained by 'sad civility' to that fireside, once so quiet, and again – cheering thought! – again I trust to be so when the echo of that visitor's incessant tongue shall have died away...

"She took us in her way from London to the west of England, and being, as she wrote, 'not quite well, not equal to much company, prayed that no other guest might be admitted, so that she might have the pleasure of our conversation all to herself (*ours!* as if it were possible for any of us to slide in a word edgewise!), and especially enjoy the gratification of talking over old times with the master of the house, her countryman.'

"Such was the promise of her letter, and to the letter it has been kept. All the news and scandal of a large county forty years ago, and a hundred years before, and ever since; all the marriages, deaths, births, elopements, law-suits, and casualties of her own times, her father's, grandfather's, great-grandfather's, nephews', and grandnephews', has she detailed with a minuteness, an accuracy, a prodigality of learning, a profuseness of proper names, a pedantry of locality, which would excite the envy of a county historian, a king-at-arms, or even a Scotch novelist.

"Her knowledge is most astonishing; but the most astonishing part of all is how she came by that knowledge. It should seem, to listen to her, as if at some time of her life she must have listened herself; and yet her countryman declares that in the forty years he has known her, no such event has occurred; and she knows new news, too! It must be intuition!..

"The very weather is not a safe subject. Her memory is a perpetual register of hard frosts and long droughts, and high winds and terrible storms, with all the evils that followed in their train, and all the personal events connected with them; so that, if you happen to remark that clouds are come up and you fear it may rain, she replies: 'Ay, it is just such a morning as three-and-thirty years ago, when my poor cousin was married – you remember my cousin Barbara; she married so-and-so, the son of so-and-so;' and then comes the whole pedigree of the bridegroom, the amount of the settlements, and the reading and signing them overnight; a description of the wedding-dresses in the style of Sir Charles Grandison, and how much the bride's gown cost per yard; the names, residences, and a short subsequent history of the bridesmaids and men, the gentleman who gave the bride away, and the clergyman who performed the ceremony, with a learned antiquarian digression relative to the church; then the setting out in procession; the marriage, the kissing, the crying, the breakfasting, the drawing the cake through the ring, and, finally, the bridal excursion, which brings us back again, at an hour's end, to the starting-post, the weather, and the whole story of the sopping, the drying, the clothes-spoiling, the cold-catching, and all the small evils of a summer shower. By this time it rains, and she sits down to a pathetic see-saw of conjectures on the chance of Mrs. Smith's having set out for her daily walk, or the possibility that Dr. Brown may have ventured to visit his patients in his gig, and the certainty that Lady Green's new housemaid would come from London on the outside of the coach...

"I wonder, if she had happened to be married, how many husbands she would have talked to death. It is certain that none of her relatives are long-lived, after she comes to reside with them.

Father, mother, uncle, sister, brother, two nephews, and one niece, all these have successively passed away, though a healthy race, and with no visible disorder – except – But we must not be uncharitable."

Mary Ferrier, the Scotch novelist, was gifted with genial wit and a quick sense of the ludicrous. Walter Scott admired her greatly, and as a lively guest at Abbotsford she did much to relieve the sadness of his last days. He said of her:

"She is a gifted personage, having, besides her great talents, conversation the least *exigeante* of any author, female at least, whom I have ever seen, among the long list I have encountered. Simple and full of humor, and exceedingly ready at repartee; and all this without the least affectation of the blue-stocking. The general strain of her writing relates to the foibles and oddities of mankind, and no one has drawn them with greater breadth of comic humor or effect. Her scenes often resemble the style of our best old comedies, and she may boast, like Foote, of adding many new and original characters to the stock of our comic literature."

Here is one of her admirably-drawn portraits:

THE SENSIBLE WOMAN

"Miss Jacky, the senior of the trio, was what is reckoned a very sensible woman – which generally means a very disagreeable, obstinate, illiberal director of all men, women, and children – a sort of superintendent of all actions, time, and place, with unquestioned authority to arraign, judge, and condemn upon the statutes of her own supposed sense. Most country parishes have their sensible woman, who lays down the law on all affairs, spiritual and temporal. Miss Jacky stood unrivalled as the sensible woman of Glenfern. She had attained this eminence partly from having a little more understanding than her sisters, but principally from her dictatorial manner, and the pompous, decisive tone in which she delivered the most commonplace truths. At home her supremacy in all matters of sense was perfectly established; and thence the infection, like other superstitions, had spread over the whole neighborhood. As a sensible woman she regulated the family, which she took care to let everybody hear; she was a sort of postmistress-general, a detector of all abuses and impositions, and deemed it her prerogative to be consulted about all the useful and useless things which everybody else could have done as well. She was liberal of her advice to the poor, always enforcing upon them the iniquity of idleness, but doing nothing for them in the way of employment, strict economy being one of the many points in which she was particularly sensible. The consequence was that, while she was lecturing half the poor women in the parish for their idleness, the bread was kept out of their mouths by the incessant carding of wool, and knitting of stockings, and spinning, and reeling, and winding, and pining, that went on among the ladies themselves. And, by the by, Miss Jacky is not the only sensible woman who thinks she is acting a meritorious part when she converts what ought to be the portion of the poor into the employment of the affluent.

"In short, Min Jacky was all over sense. A skilful physiognomist would at a single glance have detected the sensible woman in the erect head, the compressed lips, square elbows, and firm, judicious step. Even her very garments seemed to partake of the prevailing character of their mistress. Her ruff always looked more sensible than any other body's; her shawl sat most sensibly on her shoulders; her walking-shoes were acknowledged to be very sensible, and she drew on her gloves with an air of sense, as if the one arm had been Seneca, the other Socrates. From what has been said it may easily be inferred that Miss Jacky was, in fact, anything but a sensible woman, as, indeed, no woman can be who bears such visible outward marks of what is in reality the most quiet and unostentatious of all good qualities."

Frederika Bremer, the Swedish novelist, whose novels have been translated into English, German, French, and Dutch, had a style peculiarly her own. Her humor reminds me of a bed of mignonette, with its delicate yet permeating fragrance. One paragraph, like one spray of that shy flower, scarcely reveals the dainty flavor.

From the "Neighbors," her best story, and one that still has a moderate sale, I take her description of Franziska's first little lover-like quarrel with her adoring husband, the "Bear." (Let us remember Miss Bremer with appreciation and gratitude, as one of the very few visitors we have entertained who have written kindly of our country and our "Homes.")

THE FIRST QUARREL

"Here I am again sitting with a pen in my hand, impelled by a desire for writing, yet with nothing particular to write about. Everything in the house and in the whole household arrangement is in order. Little patties are baking in the kitchen, the weather is oppressively hot, and every leaf and bird seem as if deprived of motion. The hens lie outside in the sand before the window, the cock stands solitarily on one leg, and looks upon his harem with the countenance of a sleepy sultan. Bear sits in his room writing letters. I hear him yawn; that infects me. Oh! oh! I must go and have a little quarrel with him on purpose to awaken us both.

"I want at this moment a quire of writing-paper on which to drop sugar-cakes. He is terribly miserly of his writing-paper, and on that very account I must have some now.

"*Later.*— All is done! A complete quarrel, and how completely lively we are after it! You, Maria, must hear all, that you may thus see how it goes on among married people.

"I went to my husband and said quite meekly, 'My Angel Bear, you must be so very good as to give me a quire of your writing-paper to drop sugar-cakes upon.'

"*He (in consternation).* 'A quire of writing-paper?'

"*She.* 'Yes, my dear friend, of your very best writing-paper.'

"*He.* 'Finest writing-paper? Are you mad?'

"*She.* 'Certainly not; but I believe you are a little out of your senses.'

"*He.* 'You covetous sea-cat, leave off raging among my papers! You shall not have my paper!'

"*She.* 'Miserly beast! I shall and will have the paper.'

"*He.* "'I shall"! Listen a moment. Let's see, now, how you will accomplish your will.' And the rough Bear held both my small hands fast in his great paws.

"*She.* 'You ugly Bear! You are worse than any of those that walk on four legs. Let me loose! Let me loose, else I shall bite you!' And as he would not let me loose I bit him. Yes, Maria, I bit him really on the hand, at which he only laughed scornfully and said: 'Yes, yes, my little wife, that is always the way of those who are forward without the power to do. Take the paper. Now, take it!'

"*She.* 'Ah! Let me loose! let me loose!'

"*He.* 'Ask me prettily.'

"*She.* 'Dear Bear!'

"*He.* 'Acknowledge your fault.'

"*She.* 'I do.'

"*He.* 'Pray for forgiveness.'

"*She.* 'Ah, forgiveness!'

"*He.* 'Promise amendment.'

"*She.* 'Oh, yes, amendment!'

"*He.* 'Nay, I'll pardon you. But now, no sour faces, dear wife, but throw your arms round my neck and kiss me.'

"I gave him a little box on the ear, stole a quire of paper, and ran off with loud exultation. Bear followed into the kitchen growling horribly; but then I turned upon him armed with two delicious little patties, which I aimed at his mouth, and there they vanished. Bear, all at once, was quite still, the paper was forgotten, and reconciliation concluded.

"There is, Maria, no better way of stopping the mouths of these lords of the creation than by putting into them something good to eat."

I wish I had room for my favorite Irishwoman, Lady Morgan, and her description of her first rout at the house of the eccentric Lady Cork.

The off-hand songs of her sister, Lady Clarke, are fine illustrations of rollicking Irish wit and badinage.

At one of Lady Morgan's receptions, given in honor of fifty philosophers from England, Lady Clarke sang the following song with "great effect:"

FUN AND PHILOSOPHY

Heigh for ould Ireland! Oh, would you require a land
Where men by nature are all quite the thing,
Where pure inspiration has taught the whole nation
To fight, love, and reason, talk politics, sing;
'Tis Pat's mathematical, chemical, tactical,
Knowing and practical, fanciful, gay,
Fun and philosophy, supping and sophistry,
There's nothing in life that is out of his way.

He makes light of optics, and sees through dioptrics,
He's a dab at projectiles – ne'er misses his man;
He's complete in attraction, and quick at reaction,
By the doctrine of chances he squares every plan;
In hydraulics so frisky, the whole Bay of Biscay,
If it flowed but with *whiskey*, he'd store it away.
Fun and philosophy, supping and sophistry,
There's nothing in life that is out of his way.

So to him cross over savant and philosopher,
Thinking, God help them! to bother us all;
But they'll find that for knowledge 'tis at our own college
Themselves must inquire for – beds, dinner, or ball.
There are lectures to tire, and good lodgings to hire,
To all who require and have money to pay;
While fun and philosophy, supping and sophistry,
Ladies and lecturing fill up the day.

So at the Rotunda we all sorts of fun do,
Hard hearts and pig-iron we melt in one flame;
For if Love blows the bellows, our tough college fellows
Will thaw into rapture at each lovely dame.
There, too, sans apology, tea, tarts, tautology,
Are given with zoölogy, to grave and gay;
Thus fun and philosophy, supping and sophistry
Send all to England home, happy and gay.

From George Eliot, whose humor is seen at its best in "Adam Bede" and "Silas Marner," how much we could quote! How some of her searching comments cling to the memory!

"I've nothing to say again' her piety, my dear; but I know very well I shouldn't like her to cook my victuals. When a man comes in hungry and tired, piety won't feed him, I reckon. Hard carrots 'ull lie heavy on his stomach, piety or no piety. I called in one day when she was dishin' up Mr. Tryan's dinner, an' I could see the potatoes was as watery as watery. It's right enough to be speritial, I'm no enemy to that, but I like my potatoes mealy."

"You're right there, Tookey; there's allays two 'pinions: there's the 'pinion a man has of himsen, and there's the 'pinion other folks have on him. There'd be two 'pinions about a cracked bell if the bell could hear itself."

"You're mighty fond o' Craig; but for my part, I think he's welly like a cock as thinks the sun's rose o' purpose to hear him crow."

"When Mr. Brooke had something painful to tell it was usually his way to introduce it among a number of disjointed particulars, as if it were a medicine that would get a milder flavor by mixing."

"Heaven knows what would become of our sociality if we never visited people we speak ill of; we should live like Egyptian hermits, in crowded solitude."

"No, I ain't one to see the cat walking into the dairy and wonder what she's come after."

"I have nothing to say again' Craig, on'y it is a pity he couldna be hatched o'er again, and hatched different."

"I'm not denyin' the women are foolish; God Almighty made 'em to match the men."

"It's a waste of time to praise people dead whom you maligned while living; for it's but a poor harvest you'll get by watering last year's crop."

"I suppose Dinah's like all the rest of the women, and thinks two and two will come to make five, if she only cries and makes bother enough about it."

"Put a good face on it and don't seem to be looking out for crows, else you'll set other people to watchin' for 'em, too."

"I took pretty good care, before I said 'sniff,' to be sure she would say 'snaff,' and pretty quick, too. I warn't a-goin' to open my mouth like a dog at a fly, and snap it to again wi' nothin' to swaller."

CHAPTER III

FROM ANNE BRADSTREET TO MRS. STOWE

The same gratifying progress and improvement noticed in the wit of women of other lands is seen in studying the literary annals of our own countrywomen.

Think of Anne Bradstreet, Mercy Warren, and Tabitha Tenney, all extolled to the skies by their contemporaries.

Mercy Warren was a satirist quite in the strain of Juvenal, but in cumbrous, artificial fashion.

Hon. John Winthrop consulted her on the proposed suspension of trade with England in all but the *necessaries* of life, and she playfully gives a list of articles that would be included in that word:

"An inventory clear
Of all she needs Lamira offers here;
Nor does she fear a rigid Cato's frown,
When she lays by the rich embroidered gown,
And modestly compounds for just enough,
Perhaps some dozens of mere flighty stuff;
With lawns and lute strings, blonde and Mechlin laces,
Fringes and jewels, fans and tweezer-cases;
Gay cloaks and hat, of every shape and size,
Scarfs, cardinals, and ribands, of all dyes,
With ruffles stamped and aprons of tambour,
Tippets and handkerchiefs, at least threescore;
With finest muslins that fair India boasts,
And the choice herbage from Chinesian coasts;
Add feathers, furs, rich satin, and ducares,
And head-dresses in pyramidal shapes;
Sideboards of plate and porcelain profuse,
With fifty dittoes that the ladies use.
So weak Lamira and her wants so few
Who can refuse? they're but the sex's due."

Mrs. Sigourney, voluminous and mediocre, is amusing because so absolutely destitute of humor, and her style, a feminine *Johnsonese*, is absurdly hifalutin and strained.

This is the way in which she alludes to green apples:

"From the time of their first taking on orbicular shape, and when it might be supposed their hardness and acidity would repulse all save elephantine tusks and ostrich stomachs, they were the prey of roaming children."

And in her poem "To a Shred of Linen":

"Methinks I scan
Some idiosyncrasy that marks thee out
A defunct pillow-case."

She preserved, however, a long list of the various solicitations sent her to furnish poems for special occasions, and I think this shows that she possessed a sense of humor. Let me quote a few:

"Some verses were desired as an elegy on a pet canary accidentally drowned in a barrel of swine's food.

"A poem requested on the dog-star Sirius.

"To write an ode for the wedding of people in Maine, of whom I had never heard.

"To punctuate a three-volume novel for an author who complained that the work of punctuating always brought on a pain in the small of his back.

"Asked to assist a servant-man not very well able to read in getting his Sunday-school lessons, and to write out all the answers for him clear through the book – to save his time.

"A lady whose husband expects to be absent on a journey for a month or two wishes I would write a poem to testify her joy at his return.

"An elegy on a young man, one of the nine children of a judge of probate."

Miss Sedgwick, in her letters, occasionally showed a keen sense of humor, as, when speaking of a certain novel, she said:

"There is too much force for the subject. It is as if a railroad should be built and a locomotive started to transport skeletons, specimens, and one bird of Paradise."

Mrs. Caroline Gilman, born in 1794, and still living, author of "Recollections of a Southern Matron," etc., will be represented by one playful poem, which has a veritable New England flavor:

JOSHUA'S COURTSHIP

A NEW ENGLAND BALLAD

Stout Joshua was a farmer's son,
And a pondering he sat
One night when the fagots crackling burned,
And purred the tabby cat.

Joshua was a well-grown youth,
As one might plainly see
By the sleeves that vainly tried to reach
His hands upon his knee.

His splay-feet stood all parrot-toed
In cowhide shoes arrayed,
And his hair seemed cut across his brow
By rule and plummet laid.

And what was Joshua pondering on,
With his widely staring eyes,
And his nostrils opening sensibly
To ease his frequent sighs?

Not often will a lover's lips
The tender secret tell,
But out he spoke before he thought,
"My gracious! Nancy Bell!"

His mother at her spinning-wheel,
Good woman, stood and spun,
"And what," says she, "is come o'er you,
Is't *airnest* or is't fun?"

Then Joshua gave a cunning look,
Half bashful and half sporting,
"Now what did father do," says he,
"When first he came a courting?"

"Why, Josh, the first thing that he did,"
With a knowing wink, said she,
"He dressed up of a Sunday night,
And *cast sheep's eyes* at me."

Josh said no more, but straight went out
And sought a butcher's pen,

Where twelve fat sheep, for market bound,
Had lately slaughtered been.

He bargained with a lover's zeal,
Obtained the wished-for prize,
And filled his pockets fore and aft
With twice twelve bloody eyes.

The next night was the happy time
When all New England sparks,
Drest in their best, go out to court,
As spruce and gay as larks.

When floors are nicely sanded o'er,
When tins and pewter shine,
And milk-pans by the kitchen wall
Display their dainty line;

While the new ribbon decks the waist
Of many a waiting lass,
Who steals a conscious look of pride
Toward her answering glass.

In pensive mood sat Nancy Bell;
Of Joshua thought not she,
But of a hearty sailor lad
Across the distant sea.

Her arm upon the table rests,
Her hand supports her head,
When Joshua enters with a scrape,
And somewhat bashful tread.

No word he spake, but down he sat,
And heaved a doleful sigh,
Then at the table took his aim
And rolled a glassy eye.

Another and another flew,
With quick and strong rebound,
They tumbled in poor Nancy's lap,
They fell upon the ground.

While Joshua smirked, and sighed, and smiled
Between each tender aim,
And still the cold and bloody balls
In frightful quickness came.

Until poor Nancy flew with screams,

To shun the amorous sport,
And Joshua found to *cast sheep's eyes*
Was not the way to court.

"Fanny Forrester" and "Fanny Fern" both delighted the public with individual styles of writing, vastly successful when a new thing.

When wanting a new dress and bonnet, as every woman will in the spring (or any time), Fanny Forrester wrote to Willis, of the *New Mirror*, an appeal which he called "very clever, adroit, and fanciful."

"You know the shops in Broadway are very tempting this season. *Such* beautiful things! Well, you know (no, you don't know that, but you can guess) what a delightful thing it would be to appear in one of those charming, head-adorning, complexion-softening, hard-feature-subduing Neapolitans, with a little gossamer veil dropping daintily on the shoulder of one of those exquisite *balzarines*, to be seen any day at Stewart's and elsewhere. Well, you know (this you *must* know) that shopkeepers have the impertinence to demand a trifling exchange for these things, even of a lady; and also that some people have a remarkably small purse, and a remarkably small portion of the yellow "root" in that. And now, to bring the matter home, I am one of that class. I have the most beautiful little purse in the world, but it is only kept for show. I even find myself under the necessity of counterfeiting – that is, filling the void with tissue-paper in lieu of bank-notes, preparatory to a shopping expedition. Well, now to the point. As Bel and I snuggled down on the sofa this morning to read the *New Mirror* (by the way, Cousin Bel is never obliged to put tissue-paper in her purse), it struck us that you would be a friend in need, and give good counsel in this emergency. Bel, however, insisted on my not telling what I wanted the money for. She even thought that I had better intimate orphanage, extreme suffering from the bursting of some speculative bubble, illness, etc.; but did I not know you better? Have I read the *New Mirror* so much (to say nothing of the graceful things coined under a bridge, and a thousand other pages flung from the inner heart) and not learned who has an eye for everything pretty? Not so stupid, Cousin Bel, no, no!..

"And to the point. Maybe you of the *New Mirror* PAY for acceptable articles, maybe not. *Comprenez vous?* Oh, I do hope that beautiful *balzarine* like Bel's will not be gone before another Saturday! You will not forget to answer me in the next *Mirror*; but pray, my dear Editor, let it be done very cautiously, for Bel would pout all day if she should know what I have written.

"Till Saturday, your anxiously-waiting friend,
"Fanny Forrester."

Such a note received by an editor of this generation would promptly fall into the waste-basket. But Willis was captivated, and answered:

"Well, we give in! On *condition* that you are under twenty-five and that you will wear a rose (recognizably) in your bodice the first time you appear in Broadway with the hat and *balzarine*, we will pay the bills. Write us thereafter a sketch of Bel and yourself as cleverly done as this letter, and you may 'snuggle' down on the sofa and consider us paid, and the public charmed with you."

This style of ingratiating one's self with an editor is as much a bygone as an alliterative pen-name.

Fanny Fern (Sarah Willis Parton) also established a style of her own – "a new kind of composition; short, pointed paragraphs, without beginning and without end – one clear, ringing note, and then silence."

Her talent for humorous composition showed itself in her essays at school. I'll give a bit from her "Suggestions on Arithmetic after Cramming for an Examination":

"Every incident, every object of sight seemed to produce an arithmetical result. I once saw a poor wretch evidently intoxicated; thought I, 'That man has overcome three scruples, to say the least, for three scruples make one dram.' Even the Sabbath was no day of rest for me – the psalms, prayers, and sermons were all translated by me into the language of arithmetic. A good man spoke very feelingly upon the manner in which our cares and perplexities were multiplied by riches. Muttered I: 'That, sir, depends upon whether the multiplier is a fraction or a whole number; for if it be a fraction, it makes the product less.' And when another, lamenting the various divisions of the Church, pathetically exclaimed: 'And how shall we unite these several denominations in one?'

"'Why, reduce them to a common denominator,' exclaimed I, half aloud, wondering at his ignorance.

"And when an admiring swain protested his warm 'interest,' he brought only one word that chimed with my train of thought.

"'Interest?' exclaimed I, starting from my reverie. 'What per cent, sir?'

"'Ma'am?' exclaimed my attendant, in the greatest possible amazement.

"'How much per cent, sir?' said I, repeating my question.

"His reply was lost on my ear save: 'Madam, at any rate do not trifle with my feelings.'

"'At any rate, did you say? Then take six per cent; that is the easiest to calculate.'"

Her style, too, has gone out of fashion; but in its day it was thought very amusing.

Mrs. Stowe needs no introduction, and she is another of those from whom we quote little, because she could contribute so much, and one does not know where to choose. Her "Sam Lawson" is, perhaps, the most familiar of her odd characters and talkers.

SAM LAWSON'S SAYINGS

"Well, Sam, what did you think of the sermon?" said Uncle Bill.

"Well," said Sam, leaning over the fire with his long, bony hands alternately raised to catch the warmth, and then dropped with an utter laxness when the warmth became too pronounced, "Parson Simpson's a smart man; but I tell ye, it's kind o' discouragin'. Why, he said our state and condition by natur war just like this: We war clear down in a well fifty feet deep, and the sides all round nothin' but glare ice; but we war under immediate obligations to get out, 'cause we war free, voluntary agents. But nobody ever had got out, and nobody would, unless the Lord reached down and took 'em. And whether he would or not nobody could tell; it was all sovereignty. He said there warn't one in a hundred, not one in a thousand, not one in ten thousand, that would be saved. 'Lordy massy,' says I to myself, 'ef that's so they're any of 'em welcome to my chance.' And so I kind o' ris up and come out, 'cause I'd got a pretty long walk home, and I wanted to go round by South Pond and inquire about Aunt Sally Morse's toothache." ...

"This 'ere Miss Sphyxy Smith's a rich old gal, and 'mazin' smart to work," he began. "Tell you, she holds all she gets. Old Sol, he told me a story 'bout her that was a pretty good un."

"What was it?" said my grandmother.

"Wal, ye see, you 'member old Parson Jeduthun Kendall that lives up in Stonytown; he lost his wife a year ago last Thanksgivin', and he thought 'twar about time he hed another; so he comes down and consults our Parson Lothrop. Says he: 'I want a good, smart, neat, economical woman, with a good property. I don't care nothin' about her bein' handsome. In fact, I ain't particular about anything else,' says he. Wal, Parson Lothrop, says he: 'I think, if that's the case, I know jest the woman to suit ye. She owns a clear, handsome property, and she's neat and economical; but she's no beauty!' 'Oh, beauty is nothin' to me,' says Parson Kendall; and so he took the direction. Wal, one day he hitched up his old one-hoss shay, and kind o' brushed up, and started off a-courtin'. Wal, the parson come to the house, and he war tickled to pieces with the looks o' things outside, 'cause the house is all well shingled and painted, and there ain't a picket loose nor a nail wantin' nowhere.

"'This 'ere's the woman for me,' says Parson Kendall. So he goes up and raps hard on the front door with his whip-handle. Wal, you see, Miss Sphyxy she war jest goin' out to help get in her hay. She had on a pair o' clompin' cowhide boots, and a pitchfork in her hand, jest goin' out, when she heard the rap. So she come jest as she was to the front door. Now, you know Parson Kendall's a little midget of a man, but he stood there on the step kind o' smilin' and genteel, lickin' his lips and lookin' so agreeable! Wal, the front door kind o' stuck – front doors generally do, ye know, 'cause they ain't opened very often – and Miss Sphyxy she had to pull and haul and put to all her strength, and finally it come open with a bang, and she 'peared to the parson, pitchfork and all, sort o' frownin' like.

"'What do you want?' says she; for, you see, Miss Sphyxy ain't no ways tender to the men.

"'I want to see Miss Asphyxia Smith,' says he, very civil, thinking she war the hired gal.

"'I'm Miss Asphyxia Smith,' says she. 'What do you want o' me?'

"Parson Kendall he jest took one good look on her, from top to toe. 'Nothin',' says he, and turned right round and went down the steps like lightnin'."

Years ago Mrs. Stowe published some capital stories of New England life, which were collected in a little volume called "The Mayflower," a book which is now seldom seen, and almost unknown to the present generation. From this I take her "Night in a Canal-Boat." Extremely effective when read with enthusiasm and proper variety of tone. I quote it as a boon for the boys and girls who are often looking for something "funny" to read aloud.

THE CANAL-BOAT

BY HARRIET BEECHER STOWE

Of all the ways of travelling which obtain among our locomotive nation, this said vehicle, the canal-boat, is the most absolutely prosaic and inglorious. There is something picturesque, nay, almost sublime, in the lordly march of your well-built, high-bred steamboat. Go take your stand on some overhanging bluff, where the blue Ohio winds its thread of silver, or the sturdy Mississippi tears its path through unbroken forests, and it will do your heart good to see the gallant boat walking the waters with unbroken and powerful tread, and, like some fabled monster of the wave, breathing fire and making the shores resound with its deep respirations. Then there is something mysterious – even awful – in the power of steam. See it curling up against a blue sky some rosy morning, graceful, floating, intangible, and to all appearance the softest and gentlest of all spiritual things, and then think that it is this fairy spirit that keeps all the world alive and hot with motion; think how excellent a servant it is, doing all sorts of gigantic works, like the genii of old; and yet, if you let slip the talisman only for a moment, what terrible advantage it will take of you! and you will confess that steam has some claims both to the beautiful and the terrible! For our own part, when we are down among the machinery of a steamboat in full play, we conduct ourselves very reverently, for we consider it as a very serious neighborhood, and every time the steam whizzes with such red-hot determination from the escape-valve, we start as if some of the spirits were after us. But in a canal-boat there is no power, no mystery, no danger; one cannot blow up, one cannot be drowned – unless by some special effort; one sees clearly all there is in the case – a horse, a rope, and a muddy strip of water – and that is all.

Did you ever try it, reader? If not, take an imaginary trip with us, just for experiment. "There's the boat!" exclaims a passenger in the omnibus, as we are rolling down from the Pittsburg Mansion House to the canal. "Where?" exclaim a dozen of voices, and forthwith a dozen heads go out of the window. "Why, down there, under that bridge; don't you see those lights?" "What, that little thing!" exclaims an inexperienced traveller; "dear me! we can't half of us get into it!" "We! indeed," says some old hand in the business; "I think you'll find it will hold us and a dozen more loads like us." "Impossible!" say some. "You'll see," say the initiated; and as soon as you get out you *do* see, and hear, too, what seems like a general breaking loose from the Tower of Babel, amid a perfect hail-storm of trunks, boxes, valises, carpet-bags, and every describable and indescribable form of what a Westerner calls "plunder."

"That's my trunk!" barks out a big, round man. "That's my bandbox!" screams a heart-stricken old lady, in terror for her immaculate Sunday caps. "Where's my little red box? I had two carpet-bags and a – My trunk had a scarle – Halloo! where are you going with that portmanteau? Husband! Husband! do see after the large basket and the little hair-trunk – Oh, and the baby's little chair!" "Go below, go below, for mercy's sake, my dear; I'll see to the baggage." At last the feminine part of creation, perceiving that, in this particular instance, they gain nothing by public speaking, are content to be led quietly under hatches; and amusing is the look of dismay which each new-comer gives to the confined quarters that present themselves. Those who were so ignorant of the power of compression as to suppose the boat scarce large enough to contain them and theirs, find, with dismay, a respectable colony of old ladies, babies, mothers, big baskets, and carpet-bags already established. "Mercy on us!" says one, after surveying the little room, about ten feet long and six feet high, "where are we all to sleep to-night?" "Oh, me, what a sight of children!" says a young lady, in a despairing tone. "Pooh!" says an initiated traveller, "children! scarce any here; let's see: one; the woman in the corner, two; that child with the bread and butter, three; and then there's that other woman with two. Really, it's quite moderate for a canal-boat. However, we can't tell till they have all come."

"All! for mercy's sake, you don't say there are any more coming!" exclaim two or three in a breath; "they *can't* come; *there is not room!*"

Notwithstanding the impressive utterance of this sentence the contrary is immediately demonstrated by the appearance of a very corpulent elderly lady with three well-grown daughters, who come down looking about them most complacently, entirely regardless of the unchristian looks of the company. What a mercy it is that fat people are always good-natured!

After this follows an indiscriminate raining down of all shapes, sizes, sexes, and ages – men, women, children, babies, and nurses. The state of feeling becomes perfectly desperate. Darkness gathers on all faces. "We shall be smothered! we shall be crowded to death! we *can't stay*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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