

THE POWDER OF SYMPATHY

BY
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Strange, when you come to think of it, that of all the countless folk who have lived before our time on this planet not one is known in history or in legend as having died of laughter.

—MAX BEERBOHM



DEDICATION

TO FELIX RIESENBERG AND FRANKLIN ABBOTT

DEAR FELIX, DEAR FRANK:—It is a pleasant circumstance that as one sets about collecting material for a book, scissoring night after night among scrapbooks to determine what may or may not be worth revisiting the glimpses of the press, there comes to mind with perfect naturalness who should carry the onus of the dedication. For a book is a frail and human emanation, and has its own instinctive disposition toward a certain kind of people. These Powders of Sympathy I hopefully sprinkle in your direction.

Another good friend warned me seriously, some time ago, against the danger of being too apologetic in a preface. For, said he, people always read prefaces and dedications, even if nought else; if you deprecate, you at once persuade them to the same attitude. And to you two, of all readers, I need not explain just how these pieces were written, day by day, out of the pressure and hilarity and contention of the mind. I have made no attempt to conceal their ephemeral origin. They were almost all written for a newspaper, and contain many references to journalism. And, if I may speak my inmost heart, I have had a sincere hope that they might, in collected form, play some small part in encouraging the youngest generation of journalists to be themselves and set things down as they see them. If these powders have any pharmacal virtue—other than that of Seidlitz—it is likely to be relative, not absolute. I mean, it is remarkable that they should have been written at all: remarkable that any newspaper should take the pains to offer space to speculations of this sort. I have not scrupled, on occasion, to chaff some of the matters newspapers are supposed to hold sacred. And it is my privilege, by the way, to say my gratitude and affection to Mr. Edwin F. Gay, editor of the New York *Evening Post*, under whose jurisdiction these were written. With the generosity of the ideal employer he has encouraged my ejaculations even when he did not agree with them.

But a columnist (it is frequently said) is not a real Newspaper Man: he is only a deboshed Editorial Writer, a fallen angel abjected from the secure heaven of anonymity. That is true. The notable increase, in recent years, of these creatures, has been held to be a sign that the papers required more

scapegoats, or safety valves through whom readers might blow off their disrespect. And that by posting these innocent effigies as decoys, the wicked press might go about its privy misdeeds with more security, and conspire unobserved with the dangerous minions of Capital (or Labour, or the Agrarian Bloc).

However that may be, and unsuspecting whether intended by his scheming employer as a decoy, or a doormat, or a gargoyle, or a lightning rod (how is he to know, never having been given instruction of any sort except to go ahead and write as he pleases?) the columnist pursues his task and gradually distils a philosophy of his own out of his duties. Oddly enough, instead of growing more cautious by reason of his exposure, he becomes almost dangerously candid. He knows that if he is wrong he will be set right the next morning by a stack of letters varying in number according to the nature of his indiscretion. If he is wrong about *shall* and *will*, he will get five letters of reproof. If about some nautical nicety, ten letters. If about the Republican Party, twenty letters. If about food, thirty-two. If about theology or Ireland, sixty to seventy. In all cases most of these letters will be wittier and wiser than anything he could have composed himself. Surely there is no other walk of life in which mistakes are so promptly retrovolant.

I have christened these soliloquies after dear old Sir Kenelm Digby's famous nostrum, the Powder of Sympathy. But in spite of its amiable name and properties that powder was not a talcum. Its basis was vitriol; and I fear that in some of these prescriptions I have mixed a few acid crystals. It was either Lord Bacon or Don Marquis (two deep thinkers whose maxims are occasionally confounded in my mind) who told a story

about a dog of low degree who made his reputation by biting a circus lion—thinking him only another dog, though a large one. Two or three times herein I have snapped at circus lions; and probably escaped only because the lion was too proud to return the indenture. Let it be remembered, though, that often you may love a man even while you dispute with him.

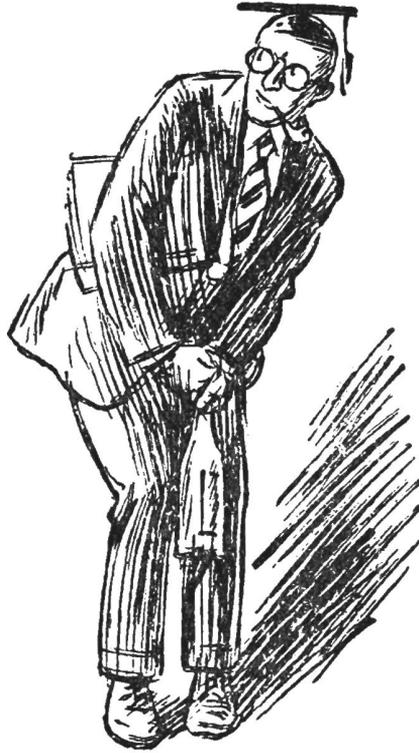
But the chief consideration (Frank and Felix) that seems to emerge from our friendship is that the eager squabbles of critics and littérateurs are of minor account; that the great thing is to circulate freely in the surrounding ocean of inexhaustible humanity, enjoying with our own eyes and ears the gay and tragic richness of life. We have had expeditions together, not commemorated in print, that have been both doctrine and delight. The incident of the Five-Dollar Bill we hid in a certain bookshop will recur to your minds; the day spent in New York Harbour aboard Tug Number 18, and her skipper's shrewd, endearing sagacity. Then consider the Mystery of the House on 71st Street; the smell of Gorgonzola cheese on a North River pier; the taste of *asti spumante*; the arguments on the Test of Courage! These are matters it pleases me to set down, just as a secret among us. And though I am (you are aware) no partisan of the telephone, there are especially two voices I have learned to hear with a thrill. They say: "*Hello! This is Frank;*" or "*Hello! This is Felix!*" And I reply with honest excitement, for so often those voices are an announcement of Adventure.

Give me a ring soon.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.

*New York City,
November 24, 1922.*

THE POWDER OF SYMPATHY



AN OXFORD SYMBOL

WHEN in October, 1910, we arrived, in a hansom, at the sombre gate of New College, Oxford; trod for the first time through that most impressive of all college doorways, hidden in its walled and winding lane; timidly accosted Old Churchill, the whiskered porter, most dignitarian and genteel of

England's Perfect Servants; and had our novice glimpse of that noble Front Quad where the shadow of the battlemented roof lies patterned across the turf—we were as innocently hopeful, modestly anxious for learning and eager to do the right thing in this strange, thrilling environment as ever any young American who went looking for windmills. No human being (shrewd observers have remarked) is more beautifully solemn than the ambitious Young American. And, indeed, no writer has ever attempted to analyze the shimmering tissue of inchoate excitement and foreboding that fills the spirit of the juvenile Rhodes Scholar as he first enters his Oxford college. He arrives with his mind a gentle confusion of hearsay about Walter Pater, Shelley, boat races, Mr. Gladstone, Tom Brown, the Scholar Gypsy, and Little Mr. Bouncer. Kansas City or Sheboygan indeed seem far away as he crosses those quadrangles looking for his rooms.

But even Oxford, one was perhaps relieved to find, is not all silver-gray mediæval loveliness. The New Buildings, to which Churchill directed us, reached through a tunnel and a bastion in a rampart not much less than a thousand years elderly, were recognizably of the Rutherford B. Hayes type of edification. Except for the look-off upon gray walls, pinnacles, and a green tracery of gardens, and the calculated absence of plumbing (a planned method of preserving monastic hardness among light-minded youth), the immense cliff of New Buildings might well have been a lobe of the old Johns Hopkins or a New York theological seminary. At the top of four flights we found our pensive citadel. Papered in blue, upholstered in a gruesome red, with yellow woodwork, and a fireplace which (we soon learned) was a potent reeker. It would be cheerful to describe those two

rooms in detail, for we lived in them two years. But what first caught our eye was a little green pamphlet lying on the red baize tablecloth. It was lettered

NEW COLLEGE, OXFORD
Information and Regulations
Revised October, 1910

Our name was written upon it in ink, and we immediately sat down to study it. Here, we thought, is our passkey to this new world of loveliness.

First we found the hours of college chapel. Then, "All Undergraduates are required to perform Exercises." In our simplicity we at first supposed this to be something in the way of compulsory athletics, but then discovered it to mean intellectual exercises. Fair enough, we thought. That is what we came for.

"Undergraduates are required, as a general rule, to be in College or their Lodgings by 11 p. m., and to send their Strangers out before that time.... No Undergraduate is allowed to play on any musical instrument in College rooms except between the hours of 1 and 9 p. m., unless special leave has been obtained beforehand from the Dean.... No games are allowed in the College Quadrangles, and no games except bowls in the Garden." Excellent, we meditated; this is going to be a serious career, full attention to the delights of the mind and no interruption by corybantic triflers.

"A Term by residence means pernoctation within the University for six weeks in Michaelmas or in Hilary Term, and

for three weeks in Easter or in Trinity (or Act) Term.”... We felt a little uncertain as to just what time of year Hilary and Act happened. But we were not halting, just now, over technicalities. We wanted to imbibe, hastily, the general spirit and flavour of our new home.... “Every member of the College is required to deposit Caution-money. Commoners deposit £30, unless they signify in writing their intention to pay their current Battels weekly; in this case they deposit £10. An undergraduate battling terminally cannot withdraw part of his Caution-money and become a weekly battler without the authority of his parent or guardian.” We at once decided that it was best to be a weekly battler. Battling, incidentally, is a word that we believe exists only at Eton and Oxford; dictionaries tell us that it comes from “an obsolete verb meaning to fatten.” Sometimes, however, in dispute with the Junior Bursar, it comes near its more usual sense. We wondered, in our young American pride, whether we were a Commoner? We were pleased to note, however, that the alternative classification was not a Lord but a Scholar.

We skimmed along through various other instructions. “A fine of 1s. is charged to the owner of any bicycle not put away before midnight.” The owner, or the bicycle, we mused? Never mind—we would soon learn. Coals and faggots, we noted, were variable in price. “The charge for a cold bath is 2d., for a hot 4d., inclusive of bath-towel.” The duties of a mysterious person named as the Bedmaker (but always, in actual speech, the Scout) were punctually outlined. But now we found ourself coming to Kitchen, Buttery, and Store-Room Tariffs. This, evidently, was the pulse of the machine. With beating heart we read on, entranced:

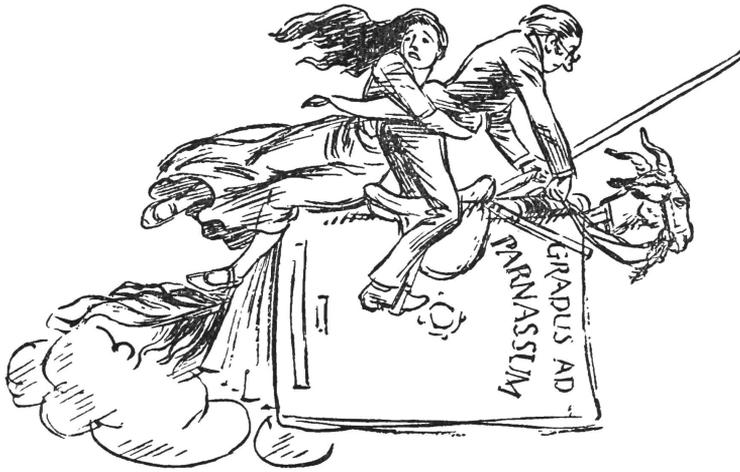
Beer, Mild	half-	1
	pint	½
Beer,	“	2
Mixed		
Beer,	“	2
Strong		½
Beer,	glass	3
Treble X		
Beer,	pint	6
Lager		
Stout	half-	2
	pint	
Cider	“	1
		½

There was something significant, we felt by instinct, in the fact that Treble X was obtainable only by the glass. Vital stuff, evidently. Our education was going to come partly in casks, perhaps? In the Kitchen Tariff we read, gloatingly, magnificent syllables. *Grilled Sausages and Bacon*, commons, 1/2. *Devilleed Kidneys*, commons, 1/. (A “commons,” we judged, was a large portion; if you wanted a lesser serving, you ordered a “small commons.”) *Chop with Chips*, 11d. *Grilled Bones*, 10d. *Kedgeree*, plain or curried, commons, 9d. (Oh noble kedgeree, so nourishing and inexpensive, when shall we taste your like again?) Herrings, Bloaters, Kippers, each 3d. (To think that, then, we thought the Junior Bursar’s tariff was a bit steep.) Jelly, Compôte of Fruit, Trifle, Pears and Cream. Creams ... commons, 6d. “Gentlemen’s own birds cooked and served ... one bird, 1/. Two birds, 1/6.”

We went on, with enlarging appreciation, to the Store Room and Cellar Tariffs: Syphons, Seltzer or Soda-water, 4½d. Ginger-beer, per bottle, 2d. Cakes: Genoa, Cambridge, Madeira, Milan, Sandringham, School, each 1/. Foolscap, per quire, 10d. Quill Pens, per bundle, 1/6. Cheroots, Cigars, Tobacco, Cigarettes—and then we found what seemed to be the crown and cream of our education, LIST OF WINES.

Port, 4/ per bottle. Pale Sherry, 3/. Marsala, 2/. Madeira, 4/. Clarets: Bordeaux, 1/6. St. Julien, 2/. Dessert, 4/. Hock or Rhenish Wine: Marcobrunner, 4/. Niersteiner, 3/. Moselle, 2/6. Burgundy, 2/ and 4/. Pale Brandy, 5/. Scotch Whisky, 4/. Irish Whisky, 4/. Gin, 3/. Rum, 4/.

It is really too bad to have to compress into a few paragraphs such a wealth of dreams and memories. We sat there, with our little pamphlet before us, and looked out at that great panorama of spires and towers. We have always believed in falling in with our environment. The first thing we did that afternoon was to go out and buy a corkscrew. We have it still—our symbol of an Oxford education.



SCAPEGOATS

THE man who did most (I am secretly convinced) to deprive American literature of some really fine stuff was Mr. John Wanamaker. It was in his store, some years ago, that I bought a kind of cot-bed or couch, which I put in one corner of my workroom and on which it is my miserable habit to recline when I might be getting at those magnificent writings I have planned. Every evening I pile up the cushions and nestle there with *The Gentle Grafter* or some detective story (my favourite relaxation), saying to myself: "Just ten minutes of loafing"....

But perhaps Messrs. Strawbridge and Clothier (also of Philadelphia) are equally at fault. When I wake up, on my Wanamaker divan, it is usually about 2 A. M. Not too late, even

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