

DON'T YOU WISH YOU'D SAID THAT?

The Unconscious Humour Of Schoolboy Howlers

(A Recent NBS Talk by I. D. CAMPBELL)



"St. George saved a girl from a monstrous dragon"

EVERY spring and summer in New Zealand a shadow falls across the land—the shadow of examinations. In the last term at school and University colleges the pace of work is increased. Then come the examinations—matriculation, degree, and what not. Then the wait for results, a wait that for many takes some of the gilt off the gingerbread in the Christmas holidays. So at this time in thousands of homes in this country boys and girls are keenly interested in examinations—and so are their parents. Thousands of questions are asked and hundreds of thousands of answers are given every year; and in this mass there will probably be one or two of those gems of unconscious wit—the perfect schoolboy howler. To-day I want to bring together some of the best howlers I have seen. I have chosen ones which I believe are genuine; but if they are not, they are such fine imitations that they will do until some genuine ones come along. At all events they are, I think, rightly included among the best humorous literature of the day.

Close to the Epigram

Before quoting examples there is just one thing I should like to say. In laughing at howlers we are not laughing at ignorance. We should have outgrown that practice in our own youth. The schoolboy's mistake is not a howler merely because it is wrong. It becomes a howler only when in addition, it innocently makes a new assertion which we find diverting. If a small boy does not know what we mean by the word "marsupial" we do not put that on record. But we do if he perpetrates a genuine "howler"—if he writes (as one boy did) that a "marsupial is an animal with a pouch in its stomach, into which it retires when hard pressed." Children are entitled to expect our constant help and sympathy, and not to feel that their blunders are being laughed at. But when we enjoy a howler, we are really laughing not at the boy and girl who write such a thing, but rather at humanity—at ourselves—for the weaknesses and foibles which the stumbling pen of the child

has happened to portray, or for the happy error we wish we could have made, ourselves, in jest.

Now for some howlers. Undoubtedly the best are those that are not merely quaint examples of confusion of words, but which contain a real substratum of truth, and result in something close to epigram. A synonym, a boy wrote, is a word used when you don't know how to spell the one you first thought of. Every family man who is a motorist will appreciate the subtlety of this one: a *pedestrian* is a man whose wife has taken the car. Then there was the budding essayist who gone one back on his master when he wrote: Confucius, a Chinese nobleman, gave up an honourable life to become a teacher. *Transparent*, we are told, means something that you can see through, as for instance—a keyhole.

It is as well that the majority of children do not understand all the tragic implications of historical anecdote until they reach an age when experience softens its meaning: "The words, 'Would to God I had died for thee!' were uttered by David after he had murdered Uriah and married his widow." A class was told to write an essay on King Alfred but not to attach too much importance to the old story about the cakes. One essay concluded with the devastating lines: "One day King Alfred visited a certain woman's house, but the less said about that the better." . . .

Quite often the child has more than a vague idea of the answer that's wanted, but lamentably fails in expression. "A dirge is a song a man sings when he's dead"—here the writer has sensed the idea but could not express himself adequately. And talking about songs, did you know that "a contralto is a low kind of music that only women sing," or that "two crotchets make a

quaker"? For that matter were you aware that "Colonel Bogey" is what mothers frighten you with, and that Handel's "Largo" is a foreign ale?

Grammar and Geometry

Points of grammar have always been fruitful in the same way. By a combination of optimism, guesswork, ignorance of grammar, and exercise of native wit the youngster extricates himself from the examiner's clutches with facile inventiveness. Let us take a few examples:

The masculine of vixen is vicar.
A buttress is a female goat.
A young swan is called a singlet.
The future of "He drinks" is "He is drunk."

Example of a collective noun—garbage can.

A comma is what a medium falls into.

Masculine—man,
Feminine—woman,
Neuter—corpse.

Geometry too, is occasionally enlivened by some startling propositions. Usually the child knows what he wants to say—he is familiar enough with circles and squares and parallel lines—but finds it too severe a task to put it in words.

"Parallel lines are the same distance apart all the way and cannot meet unless you bend them."

And in somewhat the same style:

"Two straight lines cannot enclose a space unless they are crooked."

"An isosceles triangle is one which has three of its sides equal but not parallel."

"Reductio ad absurdum is short for Q.E.D."

It was probably no schoolboy who coined this one: "The Romans made their roads straight so that the Britons could not hide round the corners."



"Henry VIII. had an abbess on his knee"

Sometimes it is a mere error in spelling that makes the result so entertaining. "Abscess" is not easy for young children—or for many adults, for that matter. So that it was natural enough for one child to slip into making this assertion:

"Henry VIII. had an abbess on his knee which made walking very difficult."

Words not in common use are often a stumbling block. Among the slips that have been made are these:

A damsel is a kind of plum (perhaps he meant peach).

A molecule is a girlish boy.

The Lollards were lazy people.

Esau sold his birthright for a bottle of potash.

A magnet is a thing you find in bad apples.

The people of Japan ride about in jig-saws.

The King wore a scarlet robe trimmed with vermin.

Here are four howlers, all with the same moral:

Courting disaster—means to get engaged.

A Christian is allowed to have only one wife! This is called monotony.

Matrimony is a place where souls suffer for a time for their sins.

Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Some years later his wife died. He then wrote *Paradise Regained*.

The Facts of History

Might I assist you to brush up one or two of the less well-known facts of history? The first is this: In the old days (our pupil tells us) married women put wood on their bodies to keep out the damp and frighten off animals. Nowadays they use cosmetics.

Point number 2: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was born in America while his parents were travelling in Europe.

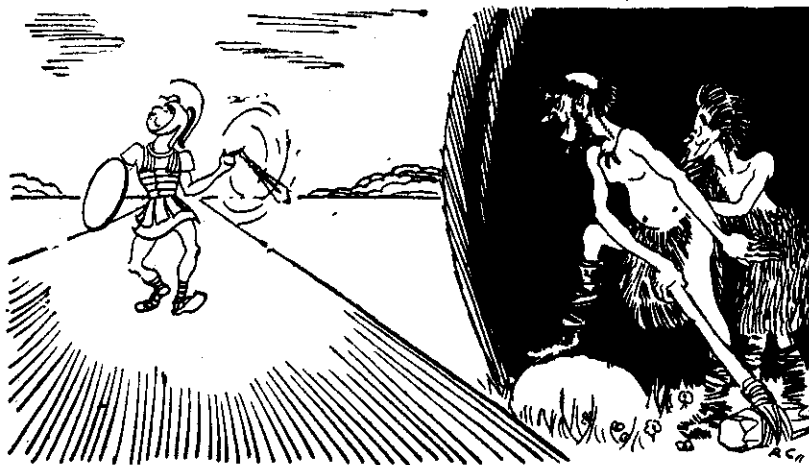
Number 3: The Tudors followed the Stuarts, but learned nothing through it.

Number 4: The Huguenots intermarried with the Dutch, and produced large quantities of grapes.

And lastly: The leader of the socialists was Mr. Lloyd George, a Welsher.

Perhaps I should here mention the interesting fact that Disraeli was the

(Continued on next page)



Why the Romans made their roads straight