

CHANGING FASHIONS IN FUN

It is said, writes the humorist Fougasse, that out of every 20 readers of a humorous publication only one actually reads it—the other 19 merely look at the pictures. When we came on this remark the other day at the start of a survey of British and American humorous art which Fougasse has just written, it occurred to us that pictures without text—or almost without—had indeed been the thing in several humorous books received for review lately. Looking at some of the pictures in *The Good-Tempered Pencil* we couldn't imagine why pictorial humour had been popular in the past. Why had it changed? And reading on—the 20th reader, prepared to give it a go—we discovered this and that—including the fact that radio (plus the talkies) had had more than a minor say in the argument.

Pictorial humour, says Fougasse, has always been popular if only because it can convey humorous ideas quickly and easily; but, as we know it, its forebears were the 18th century engravers and the popular illustrated ballads, tracts, leaflets and broadsheets. To the independent British and American merchants of the 19th century, however, the raffish humour of the century before was representative of what they regarded as, to say the least, an immoral and effete upper class. So humour had to prove its respectability before it could be accepted in the home. In America this took nearly the whole century. But Britain launched *Punch* in 1841, and with several first-class artists and Thomas Hood's *Song of the Shirt* to help it along, it survived to become a member of the middle-class family.

Around the middle of the century pictorial humour consisted of a beautiful drawing, "while the actual humour—popularly assumed to be relatively unimportant—was provided by the slightly exaggerated expressions on one or more

**The Good-Tempered Pencil*, by Fougasse; Max Reinhardt, N.Z. price 20/.

of the faces, and the lengthy description, as minutely detailed as the drawing, below."

Fougasse thinks that those minutely detailed legends—like the one below—are less ridiculous if we imagine father and the family in the parlour after the evening meal. Father would want to read out the legends of the drawings that amused him, but he wouldn't want to surrender the paper so that others could see. But the other, more important function of that final parenthesis (Bilious Old Gentleman feels quite sick) was to increase "listener-participation"—to provide a sort of written counterpart of the oral story-teller's beam and pause at the end of his story.

The first great step towards the sort of pictorial humour we know today was taken in the 1880s when it became possible to photograph a drawing straight on to a metal plate. The new method, says Fougasse, "opened the road to all the types of drawing best suited to pictorial humour, for all those that exploit humour in the actual drawing . . . for lines with vitality, energy, unexpectedness . . . for lines that are an end in themselves, instead of merely a means." For 10 years after the change some British artists still drew in the old style; but the British periodicals of 1910 show not only how much change there had been, but how much must follow. Phil May, "more or less the father of the 'careless rapture' School," was one of the first to take advantage of the new method; but so firmly was public taste fixed to the static wood-engraving that when his drawings first appeared it was thought necessary to explain that he "did in fact put in every line of the folds of the coat, but, unlike every other artist, he then rubbed them all out again—all, that is, that were not absolutely essential." From 1910 to 1925 the slow change continued. Accurate academic drawings which illustrated the legend below continued, but it became increasingly evident that the drawing

that concentrated on "the humorous expression of a humorous idea" without worrying too much about draughtsmanship was nearer to the heart of true pictorial humour and in the hands of a master could give more pleasure to the reader once he realised that it was drawn like that "on purpose."

It's hard for the young to realise, says Fougasse, that only 30 years ago almost all the instruction and entertainment of the average family came from the printed word. It took the movies and radio (especially radio, since it was busy all day) to change all that—and while they were about it they changed pictorial humour into the form we know now. This was its second great revolution. "The days of the long-drawn-out legend, and of the drawing that one could explore and enjoy at one's ease, were over: the impact of the film and the radio, with a message that had to be absorbed at the moment of utterance . . . forced the reader to become progressively more and more accustomed to the hare, and therefore less and less tolerant of the tortoise." And it forced the reader also to overhaul his whole receptive mechanism, so that he could keep up with the new forms of entertainment.

The revolution, again, was not particularly sudden and violent. But this time the artists came under the new influences and so were on the side of change. In America the revolution moved faster largely because *The New Yorker* and its editor Harold Ross were there to see that it did. In Britain, on the other hand, since "no 'typical reader' is ever wildly enthusiastic about change, and movement must always be slower in a periodical that is already well established," the change was more gradual.

As the revolution got under way legends became shorter and shorter, and drawings simpler and simpler. And in line with the "quickness and sud-

denness" of movie and radio, draughtsmanship began to concentrate on sudden impact and quick execution—or, at any rate, it tried to convey their illusion. Unnecessary trimmings were eliminated. Backgrounds became mere formulae, and "slights-of-hand" of every sort began to appear. There was much experiment with the style and character of humour, and with the development of new forms of humorous expression. And in the humour itself there was a greater freedom, and a greater capacity for being humorous at its own expense. Thurber's *Barking Seal* (see next page) illustrates humour's new liberty to do what it liked, while Daniel Petteward (also on page 5) shows that "the tribe of Thurber" was not confined to America.

Perhaps, says Fougasse, we are moving towards a better and wider conception of humour—one that on the utilitarian side will not only correct the "ridiculousnesses" likely to impair our relations with our fellows but those that are likely to impair our relations with ourselves. Perhaps we can say that the individual is now more prone to laugh at himself, less prone to laugh at others. At any rate, the humour of today is "more humane, more tolerant, more sympathetic, more understanding"; and if we still notice harsh humour about, the point is we do notice it. It isn't long ago that we were laughing at people for things they couldn't help—at tramps for being tramps, and so on.

Looking into the future, Fougasse believes that eventually we shall be able to enjoy humour without utilitarian purpose—humour that "doesn't have to find an established eccentricity or illogicality of behaviour to take off from, but rises vertically from some sublime transposition of fancy and fact."

VINTAGE "PUNCH" (below)—Edwin (suddenly, after a long pause): "Darling!" Angelina: "Yes, Darling?" Edwin: "Nothing, Darling. Only DARLING, Darling!" (Bilious Old Gentleman feels quite sick.) RIGHT: An early Phil May—"What bait are yer usin', Billie?" "Cheese." "What are yer tryin' ter catch—mice?"

