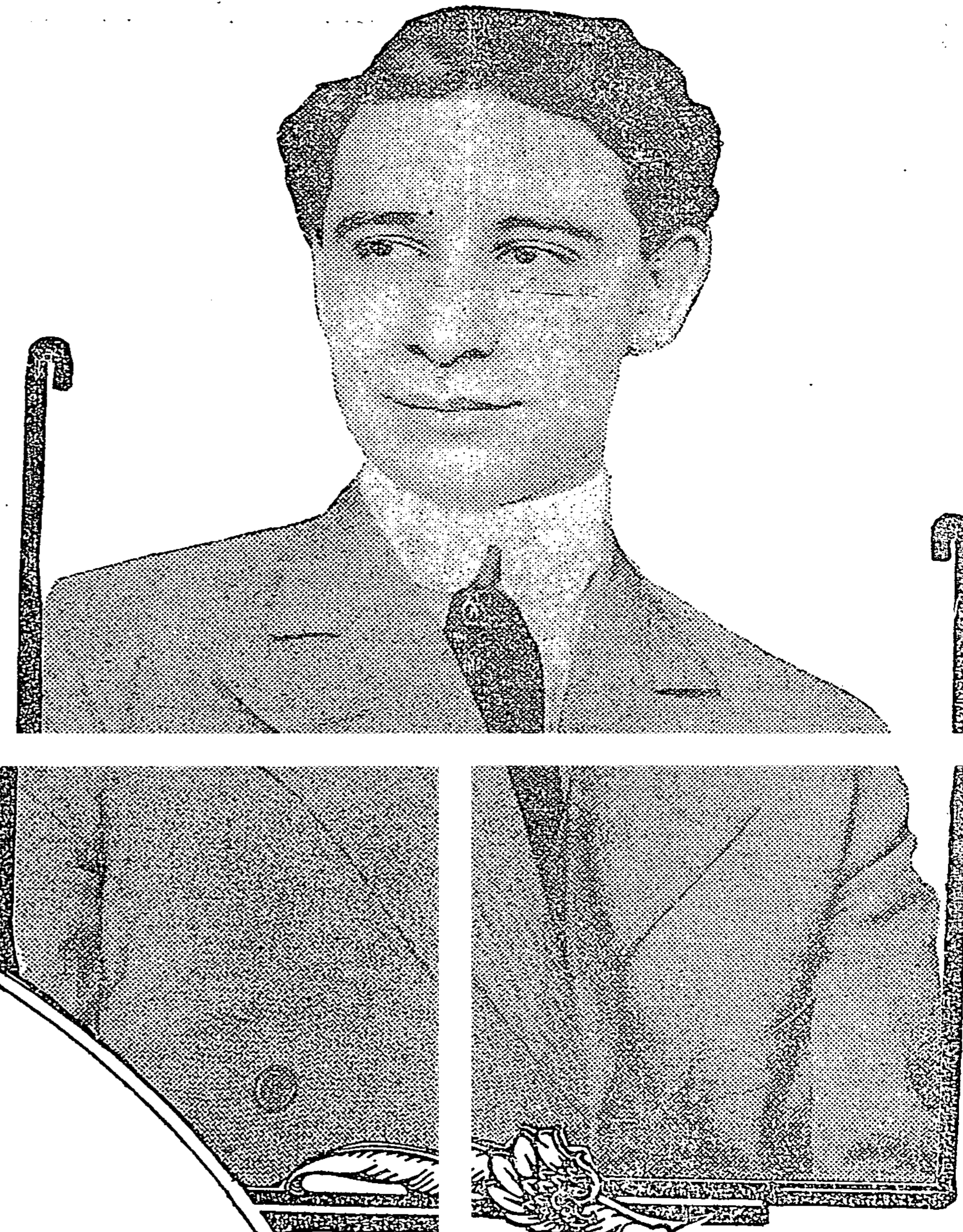


A MAN WHO HAS TO READ 10,000 JOKES A MONTH

"F. P. A.," Who Also Writes Jokes Himself, Gives The Times the Confessions of a Professional Chestnut Gatherer---How He Keeps Sane by Reading Darwin.



Franklin P. Adams ("F. P. A.")

To the man who pays 10 cents for a comic week in the hope of side-tracking dull care, reading jokes for a living unobtrusively seems like a joyous, care-free, rib-tickling occupation.

But it isn't.

Last Monday, when all Manhattan Island and some other parts of the Nation were holidaying, a reporter from The Times found his way into the sanctum of America's greatest joke, (i.e., one to whom jokes are made.) His name is Franklin P. Adams, and he keeps the wolf away from his door by reading the jokes that are sent to Everybody's Magazine in the hope that they will ultimately blossom on "The Spreading Chestnut Tree." The wolf, apparently, has a sense of humor.

Times, a thousand strong, were heaped about Mr. Adams when the reporter entered by appointment—for an interview on "The American Sense of Humor."

Mr. Adams slipped a joke into Darwin's Origin of Species, and, closing the volume with a reluctant sigh, tossed it upon a heap of humor.

"An incongruous book for a professional joke-gatherer to read," said the reporter by way of starting things.

"My dear Sir," exclaimed Mr. Adams incisively, "don't you know that when Darwin wanted relaxation he read trashy society novels? I am Mr. Darwin reversed; having read some few hundred jokes as my day's work, I am now picnicking on 'Origin of Species.' If you are curious, there are the books that I turn to for relief."

Joke try to stand on its own feet. They seem to think that a recommendation of some sort can help bolster the joke up. Here is the usual recommendation: "This actually happened." Now, as a matter of fact, the real funny things don't happen in a million years. It's a bromide that truth is stranger than fiction; but when it comes to humor, fancy has got fact—

Mr. Adams hesitated, and the reporter, dropping into the vernacular, added: "Beaten a mile."

"Yes, but don't say it that way; the expression is so stale."

Another minute of silence, which was terminated by Mr. Adams: "Speaking of the inclosures that accompany nearly all jokes except those sent in by professional writers, a thing that gets me sore is the superfluous information that they usually convey. 'Find enclosed stamped and addressed envelope' and 'find enclosed jokes on separate paper' are two of the commonest varieties of this excrescence of information."

"Another habit they have is the effort to be facetious in the letters that accompany their jokes. The most usual form is a play on the word 'chestnut.' Each one pulls it off as though he had lit on something brand new and very funny. 'Here are some chestnuts that should be packed,' 'chestnuts ripe, but not wormy,' are a few samples of this lame-duck humor. You can save how many introductions of this kind keys me up with joyous expectation of the accompanying jokes. 'But in the letters that make no effort to be funny, I find some good laughs. How's that?'"

"Here's a Tendentia variation of these touching letters:"

Dear Sir: Editor: Three weeks ago I had the misfortune to be forced on to the Water Wagon. Reason—not because of any dislike for, nor because of any ill-effects of, booze—just broke, that's all. As something to take up the time formerly spent with the boys, I dug up the back numbers and reread Chestnuts. After exhausting the supply, My Eye, for the first time, fell upon—Editor's Note: A good story is a treasure. We shall gladly pay for available ones. That last sentence got me quickly. I dug up the booze parlor stories. All unavailable. So dug up some that I thought could train in the available class. Have sent three several bunches ahead of this. Yours in effort, L. J. T.

The jokes went back, but the message was accepted."

Another moment of silence during which the chestnut gatherer shifted his attitude, also his line of thought.

"There are a lot of people who seem to think that Everybody's Magazine is conducting a correspondence school in joke-writing. Here's an instance. It came from Chicago, Ill.:"

Dear Sir: Enclosed please find humorous yarns that are of my own imagination. If these jokes prove to be satisfactory so that you deem them worthy of reward, I would be pleased to hear from you. It is my ambition to be a humorist, and if you would drop me a few lines of criticism respecting the enclosed yarns, I will be greatly obliged. Truly, I am handing them. "Does this thing please me?" that is my only test. Writing down to the public is all rot; the public is not near so bromidic as editors, theatrical managers, and most writers believe it to be.

"A funny man has got to have leeway to be dull. My advice is, fire away and take your chance on a hit or a miss."

Insisting advice; but the reporter asked: "Isn't reputation a great aid to a humorist?"

"In working off a joke, reputation is half the battle. You see, everybody prides himself on having a keen sense of humor. When confronted with a reputation, most men are afraid not to laugh. The man with a reputation is sure of a hearing, and 99 per cent. sure of a laugh, so he's not afraid to spring whatever comes into his head, which—as I said a moment ago



Hunting for New Jokes Has Become an Obsession with Him.



Mr. Adams waved his hand toward his bookshelves as he read some of the jokes of Emerson, Browning, and other heavyweights.

"You see, everything in this world goes by contrast. But," added Mr. Adams hurriedly, "don't quote me to that effect. It's so bromidic."

It is a month and a half ago that I had read some 7,000 jokes as my day's work, but it was a poor day's work. I am afraid the holiday spirit has not held of me. I have got to make half a day in and day out, Sundays and holidays not excepted, an average of over three hundred jokes if I am going to keep abreast of my mail."

A minute's silence while the reporter did a sum in mental arithmetic. Then:

"Do you mean to say that like thousands of jokes are submitted to you each month?"

"Never ten thousand. When do they come from? There's a couple that come from the headship table, 'Judge for yourself.'"

"There were jokes in plain envelopes, in created envelopes, in sealed envelopes, jokes in envelopes that came so-called 'Return-in-5-days' notes, printed in the name of lawyers, from doctors, from bank officers, from railroad officials; jokes in envelopes that were addressed in childish, boyish, girlish, and shaky old-age handwritings, in illiterate scrawls, and in clerical Spencerian flourishes; jokes in envelopes, &c., and in fact, had been post marked in all parts of the Union, and this suggested a question:

"What section of the United States seems to have the best sense of humor?" asked the reporter.

"I really haven't the slightest idea. Some few of them come from some of the States of the country, from Chicago, Ill., from Painted Post, N. Y., from—"

"Tombstone, Arizona?"

"Yes, from Tombstone, too; but don't say so; the remark is really not very funny."

"The reporter bowed a respectful head. "In a minute's silence, then:"

"If I may be pardoned, Mr. Adams, for introducing a bromide: is it true that women have no sense of humor?"

"No," (very decidedly), "it is not. Of the fifteen jokes that I sift each month from the 10,000 that are submitted, I find that about half of them are from women. They are strictly accurate, however, I should say that a good deal more than half of the jokes submitted come from women."

"What's your theory for that?"

"I have no theory. But here's the fact: most of the jokes that women submit are of the bright sayings of some little Charlie or little Mary of theirs, aged five. Now, if you know little Charlie or little Mary and Uncle John, to whom the bright saying was addressed, you would undoubtedly join Mother in an appreciative laugh. But let the bright saying appear in cold type on Page 68 of 'The Spreading Chestnut Tree' and you wonder why. An affidavit, duly attested before a notary public, to the effect that little Charlie or little Mary, as the case may be, is only five years old, sometimes accompanies this variety of joke."

"Few contributors are willing to let a

Mr. Adams fished out of his desk a painfully inscribed epistle:

Howard, R. I.

Editor of Everybody's:

Dear Sir: Inclosed you will find, under my pen name of Herr von Hornberg-Boenniglein, the MSS. of three half-dozen sets of humorous paragraphs, viz., Nos. 39 to 66 of a collection of seventy half-dozen sets, or 420 paragraphs in all. In order to make quick sales I offer these at the nominal price of \$2.00 a set, or \$6.00 for the three sets, if taken together. I can furnish more such sets at a discount at the same merely nominal price. However, I make this offer on the condition that you make your decision, or choice, at once, and in case you desire to retain them send me the price thereof within one week's time or otherwise forfeit the rejected sets of humorous paragraphs at once. Having to hear from you within the appointed time, or perhaps receive orders for additional sets, I am yours very truly, A. T. S.

"Needless to say," continued Mr. Adams, "his entire 'three half-dozen sets of humorous paragraphs' did not average 1 per cent. of the unemphatic humor of his letters. A mild and quite common variation of the letter is the statement, usually accompanying some very poor jokes: 'I have lots like the inclosed and would like to become a regular contributor.'"

Sometimes we get a good, straight-from-the-shoulder opinion regarding something like this: "This is much funnier than anything you ever printed. If you don't accept it you have no sense of humor. Every one I told it to roared." Here's a sample from Culpeper, Va.:

Mr. Adams handed over a piece of brown paper upon which was scrawled:

Dear Sir: I send you two jokes which is just as good if not better than most I have read in your jokes.

J. G.—

The jeketaster sighed wearily: "There are a lot of people who seem to think it necessary to call my attention to the fact that they have inclosed a joke. Here's a sample:"

Cañon City, Col.

Gentlemen: As I have on hand some very good short stories, some jokes and funny sayings, I thought it best to write and explain to you that they are just the thing for The Spreading Chestnut Tree. I shall be glad to accept anything you wish to give for them. Truly, T. B.

"When I looked over his 'jokes and funny sayings' I agree with him that he'd be glad to accept anything I'd give for them."

"Then there are a lot of people who seem to think it will help things along if they explain just why they have taken to joke-writing. The happy holiday season brings me a lot of letters like this:"

Blackstone.

Dear Sir: Inclosed you will find a few jokes. I am a schoolgirl of sixteen, and you know all girls like a little Xmas money, so kindly send what you think my jokes are worth. I sent you some last year, but you said you received mine too late. Hoping to hear from you in time. Respectfully, IDA MAY D.

P. S.—Let me know if you would like me to write every month.



Ten Thousand Jokes a Month.

Mr. Adams tossed over a letter written on the stationery of the Oklahoma State Penitentiary:

"Messrs: While reading some of the ancient literature that is always cheerfully given to the man on the inside I run across a copy of Everybody's Magazine, and under the heading of 'The Spreading Chestnut Tree' I noticed your offer to pay for available stories. I am trying to raise money to pay an attorney a retaining fee to obtain my release. If the inclosed three prison stories in your estimation are worthy of notice, please send me what you think they are worth. I need \$30 and I have no one to aid me to get it. I have twenty-seven years to do yet to complete my sentence. My crime was 'unwritten law murder.' I would not uphold licentiousness in my home and am doing time because of it. Very respectfully, W. R.

"Think of it! Writing jokes with 27 years in a penitentiary ahead of him, I was sorry that his jokes had to be sent back. He is not the only convict, however, that I have had among my would-be contributors. There was one fellow I remember who sent me a number of jokes on the stationery of the prison at Deer Lodge, Mont. In the prison rules for writing and receiving mail, printed at the top of the paper, was this: 'Prisoners in good standing can write once a month.' Now, think of a man who has only one opportunity a month to communicate with the outside world using it to try his luck as a joke-writer. This was the message that accompanied his contributions: 'If you don't want these, don't send me any regrets—I have plenty of my own.'"

"And did you drop him a few lines?" asked THE TIMES man.

"Yes, I told him to keep on trying."

"Is that your recipe for the making of humor?"

"I know of none other."

Mr. Adams paused; smiled a smile of sweet reminiscence. Then:

"You know, I write funny stuff myself."

Another pause. Mr. Adams apparently thought the next line was the reporter's.

"Yes," said the latter, "a friend of mine from South America told me that you do."

"Well, in writing this funny stuff of mine, [another reminiscent smile] I just keep plugging along at my own gait, choosing my own roads and by-roads. I speak figuratively. What I want you to understand is this: There is no scale with which you can weigh a joke and decide that this one will tip the beam for a laugh; that the other one is short-weight."

"You think one thing is funny; I, perhaps, think something else is funny. Each of us is entitled to laugh at his own joke. The difficult thing is to get other people to laugh with us. When we get a big enough chorus of ha-ha's, then, and then only, are we justified in considering ourselves humorists."

"A man who, with a joke on the tip of his tongue or the nib of his pen, stops to ask himself, 'Will this please my audience?' is lost. Paint heart never won a fair laugh. If you think you have a funny thing, spring it. If you are a writer, write what pleases yourself. I never stop to ask myself if the public will like what

A Hitherto Unpublished Cartoon of Adams by McCutcheon of The Chicago Tribune.

"Is the only way to be funny." At the end of this involution of thought, Mr. Adams smiled sulkily.

"But aren't you afraid to give this 'keep-on-trying' advice? Aren't you afraid that you'll be swamped in a flood tide of jokes?"

"No. So far as joke-writing is concerned, I believe that the American people are now working at pretty near their maximum capacity. When a man is receiving ten thousand jokes a month, two or three hundred more wouldn't count."

"But how do you wade through that mass of stuff?"

"Why, I've reduced it to a system. If a man addresses himself as 'Mr.' on his inclosed stamped and addressed envelope, I feel that he has very little sense of humor and that the chances are that his inclosed joke is not going to get a laugh from me. I have never yet accepted a joke from a man who addressed himself as 'Esq.'"

"When it comes to examining the joke itself, the first thing I do is to read the last line, technically known as the 'snapper.' I can usually get the whole joke there. But if I don't recognize the 'snapper,' then I read the entire joke."

"Talking of recognizing a joke from its last line reminds me of a session that I once had with Sam Blythe. Blythe said that there was no such thing as a new joke; that there was not a joke for which if I gave him the beginning, he could not give me the ending. The session lasted an entire afternoon. Blythe made good his assertion. He put over two, though, that I could not finish."

"You apparently believe, then," said THE TIMES man, "in Mark Twain's theory that there are only seven jokes in the world, all very old, and that all other jokes are merely variations on these seven originals?"

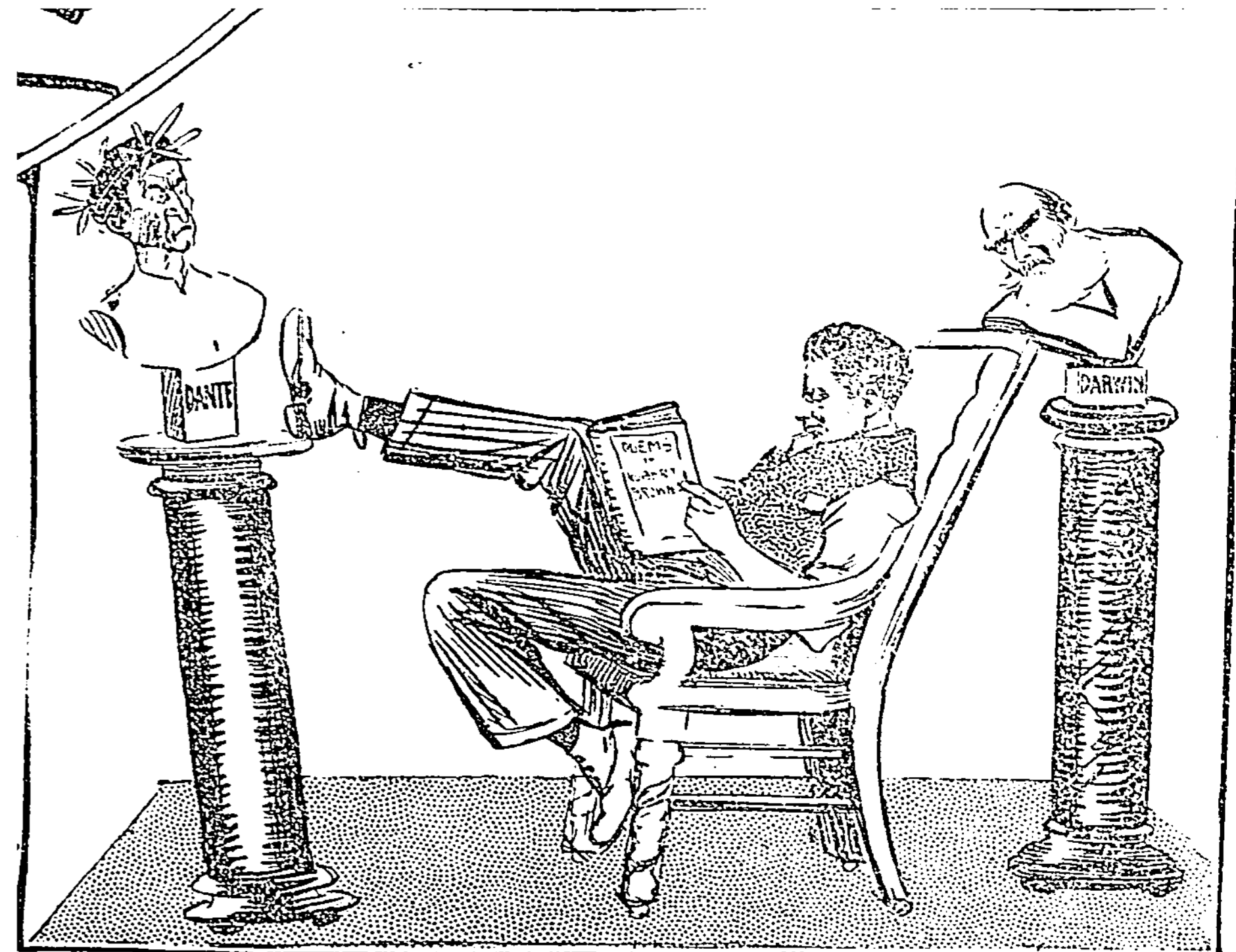
"No, I have no theory on jokes; a joke's a joke and that's all there is to it."

"But how do you pass judgment on the contributions that are sent to you?"

"If a contribution makes me laugh it's a joke; if it doesn't make me laugh it's not a joke. I know of no other test that you what a joke is, but from my own view point I can answer you this question should you put it to me: When is a joke not a joke?"

"The reporter put the question: "When, Mr. Adams, is a joke not a joke?"

"Ninety-nine times out of a hundred," answered Mr. Adams promptly,



For Recreation He Goes to Serious Literature.

The reporter inscribed the answer in his notebook.

"But even that's an old one," commented the jeketaster, sadly.

"What do you think of the future of American humor?"

"I believe that the future is full of good jokes, but the past we have always with us."

The jeketaster paused; he lighted a pipe; blew a few reflective puffs; then, lighting on the following thought, he let the pipe go out:

"The trouble with a good joke is that it lives so long; it wears out its welcome."

to go at the task each day?" asked the reporter.

"The hope of finding a new joke. When I find one it brightens the whole day. Oh, yes, I find some new jokes at least I think they're new."

"But I do not expect ever to find the best joke. My predecessor, Mr. Robert Rudd Whiting, found that and printed it in the Chestnut Tree a few years ago."

"What was it? What the story of the Rubie who went to the circus and stopped before the giraffe. For a few minutes he stood in silence, gazing up at it. He spat. Then: 'Hell, there ain't no such animal!'"