

WHO WAS THE FIRST MAN--OR WOMAN--TO MAKE A JOKE?

Some Familiar Specimens of Modern Humor Traced to Classic Greek and Roman Sources.

IT would be hard to say which age saw the birth of the first joke. No doubt, man had some sense of humor even during his struggling cave-dwelling days. Expressed, most likely, in rough-and-tumble horse play or in practical jokes rather than in keen jest and witty repartee.

Very likely the first jocular utterance had origin in the form of criticism on the personal appearance, dress, manners, or customs of others. A sort of corrective censure, one might say, on those who dared to depart from the accepted rules of the community.

The works of the ancient Greek and Roman authors abound in jests. A great number are severely personal, of a cutting and sneering kind. Others are mere puns and verbal jests, incapable, of course, of being translated. But in many the fun depends entirely on the sense—or rather, nonsense—of the thing. As we read them the antiquity of many of our present-day jokes is brought to light. In spite of their age, the humor in these classical jokes is as poignant as ever. For instance, this quip from ancient Greece, how appropriate and full of meaning to all ages:

Archelaus, asked by a talkative barber how he would like to be shaved, replied: "In silence."

And this, surely, we have heard before: Gnathene of Athens was offered some rather poor wine. When told that its age was sixteen years, dryly remarked, "It's pretty weak for its age."

A similar jest is related of Cicero. When told at a banquet that the wine he was drinking was forty-year old Falernian said: "By my faith! It bears its age well."

And here is the classical form of the woman's age joke:

Cicero, hearing the wife of a Roman patrician say that she was but 30 years old, said: "No doubt 'tis true, for it is twenty years now that I have heard you say it."

Just as good as ever is this irony of twenty-two hundred years ago:

The painter Apelles, who flourished in the time of Alexander, was shown a picture by an inferior artist who boasted of having sketched it out in an exceedingly short space of time. "Yes, I can see that very well," said Apelles: "but I am surprised that you did not make several other pictures ~~at the same time~~ in the same space of time."

We are indebted, according to tradition, to this same Apelles for one of our common phrases. The painter had listened with patience and profit to a cobbler's criticism of the sandals in a picture. But when the cobbler began to enlarge the field of his criticism to other parts of the painting he received this rebuke from Apelles: "Shoemaker, stick to your last."

In "where the shoe pinches," the ancient rendering took this form:

"There was general disapproval of the actions of a Roman citizen who had divorced his chaste, rich, and beautiful wife. "But," said he, pointing to his foot, "here is a shoe, well made and brand new; no one but myself knows where it pinches."

As to-day, in the days gone by the doctors were made the target of the jester's fling:

Pausanias, the Spartan General, when asked by a physician how it was that he was never ill, exultingly answered, "Because I never consult you."

At another time Pausanias said that the best physician was the one who dispatched his patients with the least possible suffering.

Pausanias, strongly disapproving of a certain physician and his methods, and berating him in no mild terms, was asked by a friend how, as he had never consulted that particular doctor, could he be so sure of his statements. Pausanias answered, "Well, had I consulted him would I be living to-day?"

A Scythian King, seeing a man during a snowstorm entirely nude, asked him if he were not cold. "And you," responded the man, "is your face cold?" "No," answered the King. "Well, I am face all over," was the naked man's rejoinder.

Of law and the "law's delays" these tales are recorded:

A woman, vainly pleading her case many times before Philip of Macedonia, received at every refusal the reply that he "had not the time." At last her patience gave out and she said to him, "Then cease to reign." The monarch, feeling that he had deserved this rebuke, immediately listened to her and rendered the justice that her case merited.

Anacharsis, the Scythian philosopher, speaking of the laws of Solon, said: "They were like the web of a spider, very good for holding the weak, but allowing the strong to escape."

A petty thief was being led to prison. Diogenes said to him: "Fool, why didn't you rob on a grand scale, then it would have been you that would be sending others to prison."

The absurd sight of a person clothed or equipped with something all out of proportion to his size always gives rise to a smile if not to some jocose remark. One common-place jest is the one about the small boy wearing a very large hat: "Hey, hat! Where are you going with that boy?" With the orator Cicero the jest took this form:

One day, seeing his short-statured son-

in-law wearing a long sword, he cried out: "Who, I ask, has attached my son-in-law to that sword?"

Of a distinctly antique flavor are these two tales of philosophers:

Archytas, the Pythagorean philosopher, on his return from afar, found his fields in a very poor condition. They became so through the negligence of the steward. He said to him: "I'd give you a pretty

good drubbing if I were not in such a passion."

A similar incident is told of Plato, who provoked by the misbehavior of a slave said to his nephew, who was standing by: "Beat that slave. I am in too furious temper to do it."

Ancient writings are rich in legends of Dionysius the Elder, tyrant of Syracuse. He wrote poems and tragedies. Once he sentenced Philoxene to hard labor in the quarries for daring to criticize a poetical composition from the royal hand. Dionysius after a time sent for Philoxene and had read to him the second time this poem. To the first few lines Philoxene listened with patience, but the reading had not gone much further before he rose and dashed for the door. When asked where he was going, he exclaimed: "Back to the quarries, your Majesty."

At a banquet, Dionysius, wishing to affront Plato, placed him last at the table. He then said to his courtiers: "Plato will probably have much to say of us when he returns to Athens." "I hope," Plato rejoined, "never to be so at a loss for a subject of conversation that I should find it necessary to speak of you."

Dionysius repeatedly refused to grant Aristippus a favor. At last Aristippus humbly prostrated himself at the feet of the King and renewed his supplications. The philosopher was reproached for this servile groveling. "You should not blame me but Dionysius, who has ears in his feet," was his apology.

One day Aristippus asked Dionysius for money. "But," said Dionysius, "I've always heard it said that a philosopher never has need of anything." "We will discuss that point, Sire, but first give me some money," Aristippus said. The request acceded to, the philosopher immediately ejaculated: "Now you see, Sire, I have need of nothing."

At a call to arms in Sparta, Androclides, who was lame, offered himself as a recruit. When refused on account of his crippled legs, he exclaimed: "I thought you were looking for men to fight, not to run away!"

There was a stranger in Sparta who prided himself on his skill in standing for a long time on one leg. One day when he was showing off his little trick, he called to a Spartan: "Hey! you can't do this." "No, but every goose can," was the quick rejoinder.

Diogenes, when asked what was the most suitable hour for dining, said: "If you are rich, when you please; if you are poor, when you can."

This same cynical philosopher, in enter-

ing a bath in which the water was extremely foul, remarked that he did not see why the people who bathed there shouldn't wash themselves first.

Two youths, rivals for the favors of Gnathene, fell to settling their differences with a fight. To the one getting the worst of the affair Gnathene cheerfully cried: "Courage, it's not a matter of who is the strongest, but of who is the richest."

Gnathene was dining with her friend Dexithe, who during the progress of the meal laid aside all the dainty morsels for her mother. Gnathene ironically observed: "It seems that I would have fared better had I dined with your mother instead of with you."

To some Ambassadors when they had finished reading a long, wearisome harangue, Cleomenes, King of Sparta, said: "I cannot recall the first part of your discourse, and in consequence I do not understand the second part, and as for the conclusion, I disapprove of it entirely."

In choosing a husband for his daughter the Spartan Admiral Eurybiades chose one of a good reputation rather than another who was very rich, as he preferred a man without a fortune to a fortune without a man.

Simonides, the lyric poet, said that he had often repented of having spoken, but never repented of having held his tongue.

Alcibiades cut off the tail of a fine dog which he had accompanying him on all his promenades. Some friends told him that all Athens was joking about the absurdity of the spectacle of a magnificent dog minus a tail. "That is exactly what I wish," said Alcibiades. "I want the people to so concern themselves about the dog that they will have no time to conjure up slanderous things to say about me."

Philip of Macedonia, after the battle of Chaeronea, where he defeated the Greeks, sent a boasting and insolent letter to the King of Sparta. Archidamus, the King, sent this caustic rejoinder: "If thou wilt measure thy shadow, thou wilt find that it hath not increased in size since thy victory."

Ambassadors from a besieged town were treating with Alexander on the terms of surrender. Alexander ordered that Acuphis, the eldest of the ambassadors, should be the Governor of the town, and that he should send immediately as hostages one hundred of the best citizens. Acuphis then smilingly observed: "Sire, I could govern better if thou wouldst permit me to send thee one hundred of the worst citizens instead of one hundred of the best."

Nor is the vogue of that most modern of all forms of humor, the answer to "foolish questions," as modern as it seems. Carpathius, on coming out of the theatre, was asked if he had been in the theatre to see the spectacle. "No," said Carpathius with a frown, "I was playing tennis in the orchestra."