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HALIBURTON'S "WISE SAWS" AND HOMELY IMAGERY

Tastes in humour, as in most other things, seem to change. Haliburton's literary fame, in his own day and for many years later, was first and foremost the fame of a humorist. On that level I doubt if it can be sustained to-day. It fails, at least in my opinion, to meet the rule-of-thumb test of what a reputation for humour should depend on. According to that test, humour provokes a hearty laugh. What Haliburton wrote (apart from his political and historical works) provokes, if my personal reaction to it is anything like general, a persistently recurrent appreciative smile. But hearty laughter? Almost never.

Haliburton, in short, was not a humorist. He was a wit. And as such, in most of his output of aphorisms, maxims, epigrams, adages, and proverbs-in-the-making, as well as in his grotesque ejaculations and comparisons,—all that sort of writing he was in the habit of terming "wise saws"—he can hold his own with any save the very best of his fellows, past or present, in the invention (and adaptation) of shrewd sayings. Ironically, so far as my recalling of the evidence warrants the impression, he has been given a good deal less than the credit he deserves for craft and skill in the practice of this by no means humble branch of authorship. It is true he was often prone to sententiousness, sentimentality, and defiant "showing off" in the making of didactic remarks, but more often (though perhaps not as often as one might wish) he came close to mastering the difficult art of palpable hits in his caustic appraisals of his contemporaries and their customs. Close enough, at any rate, to justify Sam Slick's insistence to "Squire" as his editor, at the beginning of *Nature and Human Nature* (which is to say Haliburton's insistence to Haliburton), that he print the ensuing wise saws in italics, ". . . as I have always done. They show there is truth at the bottom." (Many, if not most, of Haliburton's, and Sam Slick's, wisest wise saws were printed in roman.)

"It requires a good stock of wit to set up for wag," Haliburton admits. Like any number of his exemplars in the turning out of timely epigrammatic

comment, as, for example, Benjamin Franklin, he gathered his wise saws wherever he could find them, besides indefatigably improvising them on his own, and he freely appropriated them for his personal purposes—more often than not without benefit of quotation marks. Sam Slick's primary source of inspiration for his attempts at proverb-making are the books of his boyhood mentor, "Old Minister," the Reverend Mr. Hopewell of Slickville, Connecticut. In fact, "Old Minister" is a "book of [them] himself," of sayings such as "The sunny spot of the morning, is the shady side of the evening." "How true them 'saws' of his are," Sam Slick testifies in his later years, and confesses with shame that he has forgotten half of them. And with good reason too, since, in his opinion, "A wise saw is more valuable than a whole book." "Maxims," he says still later, "are deductions ready drawn, and better expressed than I could [once] do them." But Sam finds some consolation in the fact that "Now I have learned to make them myself." Another of Sam Slick's mentors in the production of wise saws is his friend, Peter McDonald, the Scottish settler at Ship Harbour. Two of Peter's private brand he quotes with approval, and notes that he wishes he had recorded more of them, "for . . . I am so yarney, I can't make them so pithy as [Peter] did." How "pithy" proverbs from whatever source could be he had observed long before he had met Peter McDonald with this remark in the first *Clockmaker*: "There's a plaguy sight of truth in them are old proverbs. They are distilled facts steamed down to an essence . . . an amazing deal of matter in a small compass. . . . they are as true as a plumb line, and short and sweet as sugar candy."

Haliburton not only helped himself freely to the treasure trove of his exemplars in the utterance of proverbial wisdom (as they did from one another); he, like them again, made free to alter what he took—sometimes with the effect of improving on the originals, sometimes not. Benjamin Franklin's "An empty bag cannot stand straight" was revised by its author to read " 'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand straight." Haliburton, with an unerring eye for what he needed, singled out the first version and deftly changed it into Sam Slick's native idiom, as "An empty bag can't stand straight." The strait-laced "People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones" may not be bettered, but it is made more amusing by Sam Slick's stretched-out alteration, "Don't throw stones till you put your window-shutters to, or you may stand a smart chance of gettin' your own glass broke." Samuel Butler's "He that complies against his will/Is of his own opinion still"—was transformed to sound quite as much like Sam Slick, first with "You may stop a man's mouth . . . by crammin' a book down his

throat, but you won't convince him," and later with "To bung up a man's eyes ain't the way to enlighten him." (Sam Slick scored a near-double duplicate with his "Thunderin' long words ain't wisdom, and stoppin' a critter's mouth is more apt to improve his wind than his understandin.") Less certain variants are his "You can win sinners, but you can't force them" and "It is easier to make an infidel than a convert.") The first half of "Too much of anything is not good, but too much rum is just enough" (the whole attributed by Haliburton to "Indian Joe") has an ancestry that reaches all the way through Swift back to Chaucer. (Haliburton also sets it up as "Too much of a good thing is good for nothing.") The second half is too widely distributed in one form or another to be certainly Haliburton's addition, but it may be. He mentions as an old Yorkshire proverb, "A full belly makes a strong back," that has not found its way into the standard repositories of such things. Instead it appears there, if at all, as "A full belly neither fights nor flies well." But Haliburton stuck to his own notion of what it ought to be by repeating it, or its sense, as "A good horse that works hard requires a large measure of corn." The elder Pitt's "Power is apt to corrupt" is a decorous forerunner of Sam Slick's derisive "Power has a natural tendency to corpulency." (There is little likelihood that Lord Acton's recently much quoted "Power tends to corrupt," etc., owes anything to Sam Slick's "refinement" on Pitt.) Scott's "It's a long lane that has no turning" (there are earlier variants) acquires a comic appendage in *The Letter Bag* that could hardly have been other than Haliburton's addition: ". . . it's a long lane that has no turn in it, as the chap said to console himself in the treadmill." That old stand-by, "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," turns up similarly expanded in *The Attaché* and, what is more surprising, with its meaning reversed: "All play and no work will soon fetch a noble to nine pence, and make bread timber scarce." Another hoary antique (this one from Swift) is also expanded, in *Wise Saws*, but with no reversal in terms: "None are so blind as those who won't see, and nothin' is so easy as to hoodwink them that's too inquisitive." The practice of inverting the reading of his borrowings was resumed by Haliburton with Cowper's line from "The Task" on the merits of town and country, but only in the reordering of its clauses. Just what end was served by transcribing it as "Man made the town, but God made the country" must be left to conjecture. The change may have been the result of a slip in memory. Haliburton's "The sleepless anxious pillow is stuffed with down, while the straw pallet is blessed with sound sleep" and his "To carry care to bed is to sleep with a pack on your back" probably owe nothing to the passage in Shakespeare's *Henry V* denying that royalty

laid in a bed majestical,
 Can sleep so soundly as the wretched slave,
 Who with a body fill'd and vacant mind,
 Gets him to rest, . . .

but one should not be too sure. There is more likelihood, though, that behind Sam Slick's "Resarve is like a line fence, that neighbours have to keep up to prevent encroachments" there is the impact of Franklin's "Love your neighbours, yet don't pull down the hedge." (Robert Frost's final line in "Mending Wall," "Good fences make good neighbours," almost certainly derives from neither). With his "When the fox turns preacher, the geese had better not go to night meetin's," Sam Slick brings the medieval "When the fox preacheth, then beware your geese" pointedly to bear on the contemporary social scene. And he may have had a similar original in mind when he said, "Every hen ought to be kept within hearin' of her own rooster, for fear of the foxes."

The wise saws which Haliburton took over from his predecessors with little or no change, except for the frequent transpositions into Sam Slick's synthetic Yankeeisms, recur over and over in every one of his works in lighter vein. The most often drawn upon of his source-books was Dean Swift's *Polite Conversation*, a volume that Haliburton must have read with relish. It is hardly stretching probability to think of it as having long occupied an honored place on his library shelves at "Clifton." "There's many a true word said in jest," "You can't eat your cake and have it too," "There's no use in cryin' over spilt milk," "You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear" (if the wording of that one may be redeemed from the absurd parody of it in *The Letter-Bag*), and "Sarse for the goose is sarse for the gander," besides those already noted, are among the maxims pilfered from its pages. Another, in various forms, concerning specially gifted persons' power to see into the heart of a mill-stone (or grindstone) is one of Haliburton's favorites. He makes use of it no fewer than five times. (According to Haliburton, "But lest your kissing should be spoiled/The onions must be thoroughly boiled," a warning to cooks quoted in *The Old Judge*, also comes from Swift. For the moment, I have only Haliburton's word for it.) In spite of being scorned in *The Clockmaker* for his "maxims of frugality," Benjamin Franklin with his Poor Richard's "Early to bed, early to rise" jingle is quoted with approval in *The Season-Ticket*. "As snug as a bug in a rug" in *The Letter-Bag* is taken from another of Franklin's jingles, but Franklin himself had borrowed it from an earlier rhyme-ster. ("No man is rich whose expectations exceeds his means; and no man is poor whose incomings exceeds his outgoings," from *Nature and Human*

Nature, sounds to me a good deal like Franklin, but so far I have had no luck in running it down as definitely his.) "Take care of the pence, and the pounds will take care of themselves" and "The early bird catches the worm" are as "frugal" as anything in Franklin. Haliburton, without carping, took the one from Lord Chesterfield's *Letters*, and the other from almost any one of the several collections of proverbs available to him. From the same collections he could have taken "Speak of old Sayten and he's sure to appear," "Soft [the originals (?) all read "fine"] words butter no parsnips," and "A cat may look at a king." Sam Slick's "Great cry and little wool, all talk and no cider," though one would hardly suspect it, can be traced all the way back to Pindar. "Brag is a good dog, but Hold-fast is a better one," used three times by Haliburton, may have been inspired by Shakespeare's "hold-fast is the only dog," but assuredly Haliburton's once used addendum, "but what do you say to a cross of the two?", was not. The contempt for anything suggestive of a fifth wheel on a wagon professed by Sam Slick possibly derives from an old Spanish adage expressing the same feeling. "It ain't all gold that glitters" and "There's nothin' like leavin' well enough alone" could have come from Chaucer, but there are more plausible sources nearer in time for each. Variants of "What's got over the devil's back is commonly lost under his belly" occur intermittently from Elizabethan plays to Scott's novels (all reading "spent" for "lost"). *The Letter-Bag's* negro dialect distortion of "When in Rome do as the Romans do" has a possible origin in Jeremy Taylor in its descent from Saint Ambrose. "When the wine is in the wit is out" was familiar, at least to readers in the sixteenth century, as was "Good wine needs no bush." "A bully is always a coward" could have been found in Maria Edgeworth's *Ormond* or in Charles Lamb's *Elia*. "A faint heart never won fair lady" is as old as Gower's *Confessio Amantis* and as recent as Miss Edgeworth's *Irish Bulls*. "Birds of a feather flock together" spans nearly the same range of accessibility, and so does "Who mells [meddles] with what another does/Had best go home and shoe his gooze." "Ask me no questions, and I'll tell you no lies" turns up in both Goldsmith and Scott. "Extremes meet," an observation which Haliburton made repeatedly, following a nineteenth-century vogue, had in his case a very likely and markedly congenial precursor in Thomas Hood's employment of it with the extrapolation of "as the whiting said with its tail in its mouth." The emergent Nova Scotian author held Hood's wit in high esteem. Probably Haliburton's most barefaced "lifting" of wise saws without acknowledgement of his indebtedness were "Men, not measures," from Burke, "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise," from Gray,

and "Whatever is, is right," from Pope. But then, he may have said to himself, "Why admit to what's so obvious?"

From what might be called the public domain of anonymous precept and folk-say Haliburton helped himself to such well known jibes and "smart" repartee as the following (many of them still in common circulation in the Nova Scotia of my boyhood days there): "Are you actilly up for all day?"; "Does your mother know you're out?"; "Free gratis for nothin'"; "I'll give my head for a foot-ball"; "Who was your lackey last year?"; "Who's dead and what's to pay?"; "As large as life and twice as natural"; "What's all that when it's fried?"; "From July to eternity"; "the wrong cow by the tail"; "to bark up the wrong tree"; "Not by a long chalk"; "The devil's to pay and no pitch hot"; "As straight as a boot-jack"; "As plain as a pike-staff"; "As dull as a hoe"; and "I warn't born in the woods to be scared by an owl."

On at least two occasions in this process of auctorial borrowing, Haliburton was quite possibly the bestower and certainly not the recipient. The credit for being the earliest to enliven his pages with the belittling implications of "small potatoes and few in a hill" is assigned by the "authorities" in such matters to Rudyard Kipling. Haliburton utilised the saying twice to divert his readers over forty years before Kipling ever appeared on the literary scene. Priority in stating "Life ain't all beer and skittles" has been ascribed to George du Maurier's *Trilby* (1894). The same comment, *verbatim*, is made three times (on one page) in Haliburton's *Nature and Human Nature* (1855). There is the barest chance (no more) that he provided his London-found friend, young Anthony Trollope, with "That's a horse of a different colour," which appears in *The Last Chronicles of Barset*. On the question of who were the authors of the rhyming wise saws which Haliburton now and then presses into service the authorities play it safe. They name none. That, however, affords slight grounds for believing that Haliburton was the true begetter of any one of these aphoristic pronouncements of long-standing presumptive appositeness:

"What can't be cured, must be endured,"

"How much a donkey that has been in Rome
Excels a donkey that is kept at home,"

"An ugly woman is like a crooked pin,
You can't get out if she once gets in,"

"Praise to the face
Is open disgrace,"

though he quotes (?) each of the first three once and the fourth as often as three times.

Of the remaining wise saws in his writings, one can be reasonably sure of those that are indubitably Haliburton's own. His, and Sam Slick's, accent is generally unmistakable. For the rest, those for which I have found no prior claim to authorship recorded, I have followed the risky procedure of crediting them also to him (with exceptions, some of which have just been noted). How risky that procedure is Haliburton himself renders clear with his admission in *The Season-Ticket* that his stories and *maxims* had been told before him by Theodore Hook "among others," including the compiler of "Joe Miller's" perennial jest-books.

There is little question, I think, that anybody betraying (like myself) a nostalgic response to things Nova Scotian will rank as the most interesting, if not the most telling, of Haliburton's apothegms those that emerge directly from his intimate personal experiences at one time or another in his native province. Living alongside the Avon river, as Haliburton did for years, often with only a rowboat to put him up or down it, would have taught him the practical wisdom of "Takin' the earliest tide helps you go fardest up the river; takin' the earliest ebb makes your return safe," and "Try an eddy . . . and then you [will] work up river as if it was flood-tide. At the end of the eddy is still water, where you can rest for another struggle." Sharing the Bluenose sea-captains' contempt for the Yankee skippers who, without proper "papers", commanded the American trading (and smuggling) schooners that infested the Nova Scotian coastal waters, he shrewdly remarked that "You can't jump in at the cabin window . . . but must begin before the mast," and he had one of his characters echo it with "I didn't get here [in the captain's berth] by jumpin' through the skylight as the [United States] national officers do, but worked my way up before the mast." (I used often to hear it as "You can't climb in over the cathead," etc.) The same contempt inspired "To handle a ship you must know all the ropes." His familiarity with provincial ship-building lies behind "Putting three masts in a schooner may make her an object of ridicule, but can never give her the appearance of a ship." His awareness of the fact that it takes more than one party in a deal to out-wit the customs collectors prompted "Where there are accomplices inside it is easier to get the door unlocked than to force it." The realisation of what lay behind his fellow colonists' complaints of "crop failures" that led to the initial *Clockmaker* series led him much later to comment that "Talk never put a crop in the ground, and if that ain't tilled, thistles and weeds supply its place." But a different kind of talk, plus thrift, won his approval: "There is nothing like homespun talk and homespun cloth for a farmer," though he knew well enough that it takes more than being able to dress a part to inspire trust: "Clothes don't make a gentleman a bit more than

boots make a farmer." (He was thinking doubtless of the "airs" affected by the place-holding gentry in Halifax.) This observation was based on conditions in Nova Scotia once all too common there and on first-hand acquaintance with the drawbacks of one of its modes of winter transit: "When you are down, poverty, like snow-shoes, keeps your feet fast, and prevents your rising." The need for give-and-take among his compatriots in and out of office must have suggested this brief parable: "If there is no hook, the chain is no good; but the chain is always grumblin' agin the hook, though the strain is on it." His aversion to political agitation and his contacts with one of its consequences surely motivated "Politics makes a man as crooked as a pack does a pedlar, not that they are so awful heavy, neither, but it teaches a man to stoop in the long run." In the light of that aversion, this reaction of his to the persistent demands for constitutional changes in the Nova Scotia of his day strikes one as surprisingly mild: "Changing one thing for another is not always reform." There is considerably more bite in "It ain't every change that's a reform . . . and reforms ain't always improvements. The fact is, 'reform' is a cant word." "Bylin' men in power is no way to gain good will" seems to have been a lesson that Haliburton never learned to apply to himself, though he taught more suavely one closely related to it: "To claim superiority is to attempt to pass another on the road, and compel him to take the dust. . . . Modesty is brought forward and made way for. Assumption has the door shut in its face." Even so, that did not prevent him from telling off his political opponents with such downright opinions of them and their tenets as those expressed in "[A theory] is a grand thing to govern [a colony] by when the electors are as wise as that are recruit, that can't even follow his nose." Haliburton professed an abiding interest in the improvement of Nova Scotia's schools, but apparently he had no consistent pedagogical philosophy concerning what was needed to effect that end. On the one hand he held "There has been no good scholars since birch rods went out o' schools, and sentiment went in," and on the other, "Wherever there is authority, there is a natural disinclination to disobedience." One of his favorite (and not unrelated) proverbs he insisted was indigenous to Nova Scotia: "An Indian, a partridge, and a spruce tree can't be tamed." I doubt if its occurrence was limited to the bounds of the province. The implicit bitterness of "There's many a duke with his arms in a homespun coat, has a coat of arms in a book, and only wants the means to get justice done and have his title" can probably be traced to Haliburton's failure to establish his right to an alleged ancestral title.

I know of no reason to suppose that Haliburton in his usual attitudes toward women was other than chivalrous and dignified. Yet in passing

judgment on women in his writings, as he frequently did with unhesitating finality of opinion, he revealed himself either as mawkishly sentimental or unfeelingly cynical. The most flagrant example of his sentimentality is the too often quoted maudlin effusion about the two smiles of a woman. There is no need to repeat it here. His cynicism is disclosed in such pronouncements as "The moment a feller has a woman's secret he is that woman's master"; "Only hold a secret out in your hand to [any woman], and it's like a bunch of catnip to a cat"; "Time is like women and pigs, the more you want it to go, the more it won't"; and "Nothin' in natur', unless it be perpetual motion, can equal a woman's tongue." The disillusioning touch of "A really modest woman is never squeamish" is stepped up in "There never was a squeamish woman that had a delicate mind," and given a merciless twist in "A woman who wants a charitable heart, wants a pure mind." But what does Sam Slick's own squeamishness (if it is that) indicate in "When ladies wear the breeches, their petticoats ought to be long enough to hide 'em"? The concession that Haliburton twice makes that "The gray mare is [sometimes] the better horse" is at best a dubious tribute, perhaps rendered the more so by the chance that it is a saying of dubious origin. There is mingled cynicism and sentimentality in "A bright smile, like an artificial flower, has no sweetness in it," and in "What a pity it is that marryin' spoils courtin'." But cynicism alone takes over again in "There never war a good husband, that warn't a good horseman," that is, one who knew among other driving skills how to wield a whip. (Haliburton not infrequently connects his comments about women with those he makes about horses and horsemanship, two topics on which he could really speak as an expert.) And cynicism remains in control in "Love won't grow in cold ground," a remark made about girls' boarding schools, where the boarders learn, although it is not included in the course of study, that "a puss [hasn't] any end to it but one, and that for the hand to go in." Recalled sentiment restores the balance, however, with "When a gal is in one pastur', and a lover in another, it's a high fence they can't get over," and with "Love and skill laugh at locks, for them that can't be opened [forced?] can be picked." Some of the details involved in the technique the second of these variants of "Love conquers all" requires are suggested by "The door of the heart must be opened softly, and to do that you must ile the hinges and lock." A somewhat similar lesson in quite different terms is taught by a pair of non-comforting warnings: "A jealous mother makes an artful daughter" and "Coerced innocence is like an imprisoned lark, open the door and it's off forever."

The number of Haliburton's adages and epigrams of miscellaneous applicability is, by any reckoning, impressive. The following samplings,

picked at random and rough-sorted, will serve to illustrate its range and quality. First, sayings that are doubtfully Haliburton's (though I have no proof that they are not his): "The road to the head lies through the heart"; "The dirt always goes before the broom"; "There's a private spring to every one's affection"; "Fashion makes slaves of us all"; "A good start often wins the race"; "The greater the sinner, the greater the saint"; and "It's easy to kick a dead lion, any ass can do that." (A partial turn-about of that one, "If a feller gets a rap from a jackass, he hadn't ought to tell about it," has the real Haliburtonian flavour). Then there is a group showing the influence of Davy Crockett "westernese" on both Sam Slick's manner of speaking and on what he spoke: "Never tell folks you can go ahead on 'em, but do it; it spares a great deal of talk, and helps them to save their breath to cool their broth"; "A disguise may save you a [[halter-induced] sore throat some day"; "[[When you're mistaken] spit on the slate, rub it all out, and cypher it over again"; "Cold lead is a supper that ain't easy digested"; and "The hand of justice is a hand of iron, and its blow is death." (The last is a clear anticipation of Mark Twain's "ring-tailed roarer" style.)

Next, a group showing soul-of-wit brevity: "Pewter cases never hold gold watches"; "Precosity ain't a good sign in any thing"; "When a man ain't cool, he might as well hang up his fiddle"; "When nuts grow ripe, hogs grow fat" (expanded, but not beyond the limits of wit, in "When grass hoppers are so plenty as to make the pastures poor, gobblers grow fat . . . when ponds dry up, the pokes get the polly-wogs"); "Don't teach your grandmother to clap (sift?) ashes"; "The spur won't hurt where the hide is thick"; "Everything gets sarcy that's well-fed and has nothing to do"; "The skin is nearer than the shirt"; "A small house well filled is better than an empty palace"; "Throwin' sops to varmints only brings 'em back again"; "Nothin' will take the wiry edge off a man's temper like a joke"; "Fashion makes slaves of us all." (But note: "Fashion is the top of the pot, and that pot hangs on the highest hook on the crane."); "Finery in talk is as bad as finery in dress"; "Duty makes pleasure doubly sweet by contrast"; "By work you get money, by talk you get knowledge"; "The great secret of life is never to be in the way of others"; "Hope is a pleasant acquaintance, but an unsafe friend"; "Money ain't Scotch-snuff, it never makes people sneeze"; "The nearer you hide the safer you be"; "It ain't easy to wean a calf that takes to suckin' the second time"; "Matrimony likes contrasts"; "A critter who is a slave to his own rules is his own nigger"; "Many a feller looks fat who is only swelled"; "There is nothin' like a squintin' conscience"; "Fellows that have no tongues are often all

eyes and ears"; "Where there is no love there will be no duty done right"; "A general favorite don't deserve to be a favorite with no one"; "A joke, like an egg, is never no good 'cept it's fresh laid"; "Grinnin' pays better nor rhymin'"; and "It's easier to cheat ourselves than to cheat the devil."

Finally, these that lose something in brevity but nothing in wisdom (except the first two, which show Haliburton at his moralising worst): "Avarice benumbs the feelings and when the heart is hardened, man becomes a mere beast of prey"; "The houses that hope builds are castles in the air. The houses of the wretched, who are altogether without hope, are too dismal to live in"; "We can do without any article of luxury we never had, but once obtained it isn't in human natur' to surrender it voluntarily"; "[Pride is found even] where butter is spread with the thumb as well as the silver knife"; "Before you can impart its brightness to steel, you must harden its texture, and the higher the polish the more indurated you will find the substance"; "A cold manner never covered a warm heart; hot water imparts a glow even to a silent teapot"; "A college education shows a man how devilish little other people know" (There is more "college-bred" snobbishness than wisdom in that one); "Conversation is a refuge from thought [and a] blind to conceal it"; "When a man is wrong, and won't admit it, he always gets angry"; "Many a man has died about the time his great baking of bread came out of the oven"; "Innocence is not suspicious, but guilt is always ready to turn informer"; "Consait grows as natural as the hair on one's head, but is longer in comin' out"; "When a feller is fool enough to stand up in the stirrups, and you can see daylight atween him and the saddle, that's your chance; give him a lift then onder one foot, and he is over in no time"; "A man should never say he don't know if he can cut a corner any way in the world"; "The decencies in life, when polished, become its brightest ornaments"; "Happiness, in my idea, consists in the mind, and not in the purse"; "[Matrimony]'s a thing that sharpens the eyesight, and will remove a cataract quicker than an oculist can"; "It's easier to make money than to save it; one is exertion, the other is self-denial"; "When custom can and ought to be follered, foller it. When it can't, set your own compass, and steer your own course"; "[The newspaper faternity should] be free, but not personal; free, but not treasonable to each other; free, but not licentious; free niggers, but not freebooters"; "A feller . . . must naturally have a good many falls . . . afore he [has] larnt the right grips and proper throws." (Five years before that epigram was sent to its author's English printers, Emerson, lecturing in London, completed a reference to the successful man with a quotation, from a source unknown to me, to the effect that he is the one who "the more falls he gets, moves faster on."); "It's only your

friends and your enemies that tell you of your faults"; and "You have to cant a little with the world, if you want even common civil usage."

Of a certainty Haliburton set down a two-ply truth in that passage in *Wise Saws* where he has Sam Slick say for him, "I like proverbs, there is so much truth in 'em, in small compass."

One of the early chapters of *The Clockmaker* opens with a scene staged in front of the village tavern at River Philip. Various litigants in impending local lawsuits, their witnesses and partisans, and the usual crowd of idle and curious hangers-around always on hand wherever the law has been invoked, await the arrival of a despised, pettifogging, rural justice of the peace to hold a scheduled hearing, "all talking, quarrelling, explaining, and drinking." A specimen of the uninhibited interchange of opinion in progress is reported:

'Here comes the Squire,' said one. 'I'm thinking his horse carries more roguery than law,' said another. 'They must have been in proper want of timber to make a justice of,' said a third, 'when they took such a crooked stick as that.' 'Sap-headed enough too for refuse,' said a stout-looking farmer. 'May be so,' said another, 'but as hard at the heart as a log of elm.' 'Howsomever,' said a fourth, 'I hope it won't be long afore he has the wainy edge scored off of him, anyhow.' Many more such remarks were made, all drawn from familiar objects.

The gift of forcible and amusing simile, *all drawn from familiar objects*, which Haliburton here ascribes to his humbler fellow-countrymen, was his own, and his most precious, gift. Not only was it his most precious gift, it was also (and this, of course, is what makes it precious) the gift of a poet, even though a coarse-grained and comic one.* It is by virtue of the obvious appeal of his earthy imagery that I hazard the prediction that Haliburton will continue to be read (by others than research students in literary and social history, that is), if he continues to be read at all.

"Poetry," says Wallace Stevens, "is a satisfying of the desire for resemblance." Haliburton's comparisons, satiric and witty, satisfy that desire in full measure. "An artist," he noted in one of his sayings, "has more than two eyes." The extra power of artistic vision (the Blakean eye through, not with which, the gifted see) which was his in so marked a degree he employed in observing the landscape and folkways about him in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. And the resultant sequence of "candid shot" pictures of places and people remains memorable owing to its

*To the best of my knowledge, the only adequate mention of this gift, in print, occurs in the late John D. Logan's useful little book on Haliburton. Professor Northrop Frye, of Victoria College, the University of Toronto, referred to it, with examples, in a radio talk delivered some three years ago over the CBC network, inaugurating a series of broadcasts on Canadian authors.

having been seen by an observer with a special endowment of creative sight, and also to its having been recorded by a writer with an equally special endowment of verbal facility — the facility of making his words truly one with the things he saw. To serve the ends he had in view the words he used were simple, not “learned.” “I hate fine words,” he (*alias* Sam Slick) declared, “. . . they are like go-to-meetin’ clothes on week days, inconvenient, and too all-fired jam up,” and as for “hard” words, “When you crack them, which is plaguy tough work, you have to pick the kernel out with a cambric needle.” And he was as clear-eyed about what his ends were as he was about the means he needed to attain them. Again Sam Slick is his spokesman: “After I [am] dead and gone . . . these sketches will be curious; and as they are as true to life as a Dutch picture, it will be interestin’ to see what sort of folks lived here [in Nova Scotia], . . . how they employed themselves, and so on. . . mellowed by time [they] will let the hereafter-to-be Bluenoses see what the has-been Nova Scotians . . . were.” Who will hold today that he failed of his purpose? (Though it must be admitted that at times the objects which prompted his comparisons emerge less vivid from his “sketching” than the objects that complete them. The intended mutual high-lighting has not quite been realised.)

Three examples of Haliburton’s more extended likenesses will illustrate his skill. The first is his description of the traditional unwilling schoolboy on his way to school. (It is also a description of Sam Slick’s meandering fashion of spinning a yarn):

“He leaves the path to chase a butterfly, or to pick wild strawberries, or to run after his hat that has blown off, or to take a shy at a bird, or to throw off his shoes, roll up his trousers, and wade about the edge of a pond to catch polly-wogs; but he gets to school in the end, though somewhat of the latest.”

His habitual mingling of the lore of woman-kind and the lore of horse-flesh (the one dubious, the other sound) shows up in this advice on how to court a skittish “gal”:

“Courtin’ a gal . . . is like catchin’ a young horse in the pastur’. You put the oats in a pan, hide the halter, and soft-sawder the critter, and it comes up softly and shyly at first, and puts its nose to the grain, and gets a taste, stands off and munches a little, looks round to see that the coast is clear, and advances cautious again, ready for a go if you are rough. Well, you soft-sawder it all the time . . . and it gets to kind a like it, and comes closer, and you think you have it, make a grab at its mane, and it ups head and tail, snorts, wheels short round, lets go both hind-feet at you, and off like a shot.

That comes of being in a hurry. Now if you had put your hand up slowly towards its shoulder, and felt along the neck for the mane, it might perhaps have drawn away, [but] the chance is you could have caught it. Well, what’s your play now you have

missed it? . . . Why shake the pan, and move slowly, as if you were goin' to leave the pastur', and make for hum; when it repents of bein' so distrustful, comes up, and you slip the halter on."

Sam Slick's directive to the Big Three ("Minister," "Squire," and himself) who have speaking parts in *The Attaché*, for dividing up the chore of "taking off" the British House of Lords is a good example of what his creator could do in the line of rapid-fire depiction based on his familiarity with one of Nova Scotia's basic industries:

"[Let 'Minister'] fell the big stiff trees for you; and I'm the boy for the sapplin's, I've got the eye and stroke for them. They spring so confoundedly under the axe, does second growth and underwood, it's dangerous work, but I've got the sleight of hand for that, and we'll make a clear field of it.

Then [you, 'Squire'] come and survey, take your compass and chain to the grass and measure, and lay that off-branch and bark the spars for snakin' off the ground; cord up the fire-wood, tie up the hoop poles, and then burn off the trash and rubbish. Do it workmanlike. Take your time to it as if you was workin' by the day. Don't hurry, like job-work; don't slobber it over, and leave half-burnt trees and logs strewed about, but make smack smooth work."

As in the case of his wise saws, Haliburton's comparisons recalling Nova Scotian scenes and persons, wherever they may have been localised when written, prove most appealing to present-day readers (provided, of course, that they are readers with tastes conditioned by Maritime Province backgrounds). The following specimen miscellany exhibits his native soil and down-to-earth, peculiar type of home-spun poetry. What it consists of has been placed on display here pretty much as encountered by chance, in no order of merit. A lazy Bluenose's futile pursuit of his horse to save time is "e'en a most equal to eating soup with a fork." At election time office-seekers canvass voters with "a smile for all the world as sweet as a cat makes at a pan of new milk." A conceited Halifax "blade" aspiring to put a "leak" in a Yankee trader "walked around and about like a pig round the fence of a potato field, a watchin' for a chance to cut in." A former gadabout belle, now safely married and properly bundled-up against the weather, after being tipped out of a sleigh looked "like a bag of soiled clothes a goin' to the brook to be washed." A destitute farm family in a leaky house huddles in a chimney corner "as an old hen and her chickens do under a cart of a wet day." A "spic and span" new gig shines "like the mud banks at Windsor, when the sun's on 'em." The close to back-sliding aftermath of a religious revival "don't give off a steady light for some time, but spits and sputters and cricks like a candle that's got a drop of water in the wick." Entering a cold bedroom is "like goin' into a well in summer." In a crowded courtroom as the judge is about to pronounce sentence "all is still as moonlight." A pretentious immigrant

in Nova Scotia swallows Sam Slick's "soft sawder," looking in the process "about as intelligent as a skim milk cheese." The head of an unkempt scolding wife is "stuck chock full of paper and pins, like porcupine quills." Dwarf trees in English parks, as compared with trees in the colonies, "look like a second growth of sprouts on the edge of a potato diggin' in a new clearin'." An easy touch for flattery is "as soft as a pig fed on beech-nuts and raw potatoes," and his alleged "vamp" is said to have "broke the pane clear out and left [only] the sash" of his heart. A stupid elder son of a titled father looked "as vacant as a horn lantern without a candle in it," and the family's butler "as knowin' as a boiled codfish," and the housekeeper as "a shelled oyster." Over the "Devil's Goose Pasture," the great Aylesford sand-plain, "the moon looks like a dose of castor oil in a glass of cider." The intrusion of an unwelcome acquaintance just as you are about to create a favorable impression on strangers can make "you feel as small as the little end of nothin' whittled down to a point."

A crook exposed by Sam Slick could respond only by "openin' his ugly mug, till it looked like a hole made in a bear-skin of a sleigh to pass a strap through." Sam Slick suffering from a head cold declared that his "two nostrils felt as large as two broken panes of glass in a winder stopped up with old hats." A Cape Breton "Garlic" girl in a romp with him "laughed and struggled, and licked out, like a haddock that is just been hooked." He boasted that he would set the "clappers" of the usually tongue-tied ladies at Ship Harbor "a goin' like those of a saw-mill." A kiss, he avowed, "fairly electrifies you, it warms your blood and sets your heart a beatin' like a brass [bass?] drum, and makes your eyes twinkle like stars on a frosty night." A prissy head-mistress of a girls' boarding school he remembered as standing "as stiff and as starch as a stand-up shirt collar of a frosty day . . . a puckerin' up her mouth like the end of a silk purse." Later on, considerably disorganized in "play" with him, "her hair came even down to her waist, like a mill-dam broke loose," and she "began rockin' backwards and forwards like a fellow sawin' wood." "Seein' a feller ill-using a horse" made him, he said, "as cross as two crooked gate-posts." "A hundred dollars" to one of his flush prospects in a deal for a horse "was no more than a cord of wood in his pocket."

A successful suitor, briefly separated from his betrothed, was "as happy" over the prospect of seeing her again "as a clam at high tide." "Swearing is a great privilege, for it's like a spoonful of cold water thrown into a maple sugar kettle, it stops the bilin' over in a minute." An old maid looked "like a dried apple that had been halved, cored, pipt, and hung in the sun to dry"; an old Quakeress reminded one of "a pair of kitchen tongs, all legs and no body"; and an old "auntie's" eyes "looked like two burnt

holes in a blanket" and her face "like a dried smoked red herrin'." An outsize, over-dressed wife of a colonial governor called up the image of "an enormous salmon-fly." "A fine, healthy, hearty, handsome gal" is "as plump as a partridge, and as hard as a winter apple." The knee-action of a fox is "like the wire end of a pair of galluses. It's down and off in a jiffy, like a gal's fingers on a piano when she's doin' chromatic runs." Being storm-stayed in a country inn "with your head like horned cattle, fastened in the stanchels [sic], a-chewing of the cud, or sitting before the fire, a-working as hard as you can, turning one thumb over the other, is dull music." "It's a tight squeeze sometimes to scrouge a lie and the truth in business, . . . The passage is so narrow, if you don't take care it will rip your trousers buttons off in spite of you." "A country welcome, like a country wood-fire, is the most bright and charming thing in the world, warms all, and cheers all, and lights up everythin'." "Feelin's" among rural folk "rise sudden, like freshets, and gush right over, and then when they subside like, run deep, and clear, and transparent." A sluggish stream on a hot day "lingered under the spruce boughs, as if it would give anything to go to sleep there." When a dull conversation stalls, "you must wait for the next rain, for another freshet to float those heavy logs on." People who can't sustain an argument "have nothin' to drive through the gate." A stupid "critter" is observed "gagin' and starin' . . . as vacant as a spare room." The Yankee mackerel fleet off the Nova Scotian coast goes "skimmin' over the water as light as sea-gulls." To a Yankee "a spoke-shave is the perfection of lazy whittlin'."

One could go on indefinitely still further exemplifying Haliburton the poet of familiar objects. His achievement of just that poetic sort underlies his most effective writing. And his versatility in delineation, whether portrait or caricature, is synonymous with it. Yet, through Sam Slick as always, he belittled himself as a poet: "I . . . hang fire, or only burn primin', for I hante even got two fingers of a charge in me, and that's damaged powder too"; and of poets in general, he has Sam say "I hate poets, stock, lock, and barrel, the whole seed, breed, and generation of them"; "poets bedevil everything they touch"; "they are a miserable, mooney sort of cirtters, half mad and whole lazy." With all due allowance for the obvious pose and purposeful exaggeration in such statements, they are repeated too often and too insistently to be dismissed as insincere. Haliburton, in great part, meant what Sam Slick said. It is a pleasant irony, then, to find oneself compelled, as one does, to point out that his best claim to enduring literary fame rests upon his life-long devotion to a humble aspect of the very art he seems to repudiate. Haliburton, I am sure, would not have spurned the urging of that claim in his behalf.