

# A HUNDRED YEARS OF "PUNCH"

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I WISH to write in praise of *Punch*; not meaning thereby the beverage of that name, on which I cannot speak with authority, but rather the classic journal of art, literature and humour whose hundredth birthday is being celebrated this year. It has a second name, "The London Charivari," rarely used now, perhaps because of uncertainty as to its meaning and pronunciation. The word is foreign, and designates "a wild tumult and uproar, produced by beating of pans, kettles and dishes;" it was chosen by the French as a name for their new comic journal which made its *début* a few years before its competitor in London. *Punch* was the English "Charivari." It may be noted that the term, with a new spelling, is known in our Province, where "shiveree" is applied to that uproarious and often distressing serenade given by the rustic lads of our countryside to newly married couples.

There must be many who feel a deep sense of indebtedness for the amount of pleasure and instruction which they have received from this great monument of British humour. How many of us have looked eagerly forward to the arrival of this weekly visitor; like Mr. Wardle, "running in the early sunshine to bid Mr. Pickwick good-morning, out of breath with his own anticipation of pleasure." In not a few households each copy is treasured; kept on its own peculiar shelf, to be taken up and read again and again.

The love of humour is universal. Most people would rather be amused than instructed. Laughter and tears form part of our common heritage. The Egyptians practised the art of caricature, the Greeks no doubt roared with mirth at the plays of Aristophanes, and the Romans smiled as they read the account which Horace gave of his encounter with the bore in the Forum. Of course there have been periods when comedy was held in slight esteem; Oliver Goldsmith declared that the humourist was "an eccentric fellow." But no self-respecting person now likes to be told that he is lacking in any sense of humour. Humour is a ruling passion of our age, while Chesterton claims for it that it is the fountain of all European literature.

Yet the nature of this grace is not easily defined, so that we know it only by its fruits. It thrives on the foibles and incongruities of human nature; yet if it is rightly accepted when directed against ourselves, valuable self-knowledge may be the result. He who can laugh at his own weaknesses has therein an antidote for pride and a corrective for folly. Humour is an appraiser of affairs, a helpful guide to the significance of events. Many an awkward situation has been saved by a witty shaft; quarrels have been settled by a timely joke. Of course there are perils in the use of humour, since it may become vulgar and indecent. If inspired by hatred or anger, it may descend to biting sarcasm or ribald abuse. The temptation of those who have a keen eye for the ridiculous is that they may offend against the royal law of charity.

*Punch* appeared at a time when British humour was passing through a period of transformation. Caricature in drawing had not maintained the high standard of Hogarth, but had taken on elements of the grotesque and coarse in the work of Rowlandson and Gillray, unquestioned as was their artistic skill. In their political drawings these artists made scurrilous representations of those in high office, even of the monarchy itself. But with the Victorian age a new feeling of propriety appeared, which was reflected in the qualities of current wit and fun. Dickens and Thackeray had already done much to elevate the standard of humorous literature. Dickens, while he was not a contributor to *Punch*, was a friend of its founders, and at one time considered the use of the title *Good Humour* for his own publication, which ultimately became *Household Words*. *Punch* originated with a group of men who had definite views as to the mission of humour. They did not intend to edit a comic journal which would lead to laughter and nothing more; they were also serious in their outlook, hoping to correct abuses, to support good causes, to purify the fountain of British fun. The first number contains a manifesto by the editor, Mark Lemon, under the title *The Moral of Punch*:

"As we hope, gentle Public, to pass many happy hours in your society, we think it right that you should know something of our character and intentions. Our title, at the first glance, may have misled you into a belief that we have no other intention than the amusement of a thoughtless crowd. We have a higher object. Few of the admirers of our prototype *Merry Master Punch* have looked upon his vagaries but as the practical outpourings of a rude and boisterous mirth. We have considered him as a teacher of no mean pretensions, and have therefore adopted him as the sponsor for our weekly sheet of pleasant instruction."

How well and faithfully the directors of *Punch* carried out these higher purposes will be made clear when we quote the deliberate opinion of Thackeray, expressed after long association with the paper. "Permit me to say," he writes, "that there never was before published in the world so many volumes that contained so much cause for laughing, and so little for blushing; so many jokes, and so little harm." Similar high tributes were given at the jubilee of *Punch*, in 1891, when with scarcely an exception the great journals of the world published congratulatory articles expressing their high regard for the reformation that had been brought about in the humorous literature of Britain, the credit for which was given in no small degree to the proprietors of *Punch*. It will also be the judgment of impartial readers that during the intervening years there has been nothing to tarnish that reputation. *Punch* has occasionally described vulgarity, but has never been vulgar.

The first number appeared on July 17, 1841, and after a brief period of anxiety captured the imagination and support of the British public. The publication of the first *Punch Almanac* was an overwhelming success, carrying the circulation from six thousand to ninety thousand almost overnight. After this, its voyage through life was more or less secure, and to-day its reputation probably stands higher than at any other moment in its history. All through these years *Punch* has given wise witty comments on the events of the day; has been severe on hypocrisy, fraud and snobbery; has smiled kindly on the weaknesses of good people, their absurdities and their foibles. It has fulfilled its promise to provide a refuge for the numerous funny sayings which would otherwise be wandering through the world homeless. It has praised the work of upright men, and has sought to maintain an independent position all its own. In times of national emergency its pages have provided a tonic for the weak, a spur for the laggard, a blast of courage in the ear of the faint-hearted, and an eloquent advocate for the hopes and convictions of a great and resolute people. It has been a moral teacher, setting forth the perils of a ruthless force that is unrelieved by any spiritual purpose, thus confirming the contention of one of our modern essayists that wit "corresponds to the divine virtue of justice."

The band of writers who guided the destinies of *Punch* consisted of men of outstanding ability, who at an early date adopted what might be called a type of journalistic communism. This was exemplified in the weekly meetings of the staff for

dinner, where the main contents of each issue were carefully thrashed out. Of this company the most famous member was Thackeray, who joined the staff of *Punch* in 1842, and was a regular contributor as writer and artist until 1854. Among his earliest contributions was his *Book of Snobs*, which immediately gained great popularity, and was followed by many other brilliant successes. When he became a famous novelist, his connection with the paper gradually ceased; but he never forgot those early days, as we know from words spoken in a moment of confidence to Swain, the famous engraver; "Ah Swain, if it had not been for *Punch*, I wonder where I should be?"

Another popular contributor to the journal was Thomas Hood, whose best known poem, *The Song of the Shirt*, appeared first in *Punch*. It illustrated the intense social consciousness of the directors, especially of Mark Lemon, the editor. This poem rose out of a press announcement that a woman named Biddell, with a squalid, half-starved infant in her arms, was charged at the Lambeth Police Court with pawning her master's goods; for which she had to give two pounds security. Her husband had died by an accident, and had left her with two children to support, and she obtained by her needle for the maintenance of herself and family what her master called "the good living of seven shillings a week." *Punch* was deeply moved by this incident, and expressed its feelings in an article entitled "Famine and Fashion;" but Hood was even more indignant, having learned by personal experience the lesson of sympathy for the poor. As he said, it was only for his livelihood that he was a lively Hood. The poem was thrice rejected, and was accepted by *Punch* only on the insistence of the editor; but the effect of its publication was instantaneous. Most of the contemporary papers quoted it, and *Punch's* circulation tripled on the strength of it. In fact the claim is made that no other poem ever had so sudden and enthusiastic a reception. Men's consciences and hearts were touched by such lines as these:

O men, with sisters dear!  
O men, with mothers and wives!  
It is not linen you're wearing out,  
But human creatures' lives!

It would be impossible, in a brief *resumé*, to give any idea of the extent and variety of the literary contributions which have appeared in the pages of *Punch*. Thinking of more recent times, one recalls such writers as Sir Owen Seaman, E. V. Lucas, A. A.

Milne, and many others. Compton Rickett thinks so highly of the light verse published in *Punch* that in his *History of English Literature* he writes; "It may be safely averred that, during the last twenty years at any rate, much of the best humorous verse of the day has first seen light in its columns."

But it is by the artistic quality of its drawings that *Punch* has won most of its fame, and in the course of the century illustrations have assumed an increasing importance. The main theme of discussion at the weekly dinners was the full-page cartoon, called "the big cut;" and it was this that was thrashed out through what must have been two hours of the most brilliant and witty conversation in England. In the early days, the design for each drawing was pencilled on wood, and was then given to the engraver to be cut. But as new methods of printing and reproduction appeared, these were adopted by various craftsmen; with the result that the hundred years of *Punch's* publication form one of the most instructive studies in the progress of artistic work in black and white. Space allows me to mention only a few of the outstanding artists such as John Leech, Sir John Tenniel, George du Maurier, Phil May, Raven Hill, Bernard Partridge and George Belcher; these are all names to conjure with, and have given unceasing delight to hosts of admirers.

*Punch* has become a national institution, having direct effect upon the social and political life of England. Its influence has been so great in the political sphere that statesmen have been slow to incur its wrath. Mr. Mundella said *Punch* is almost the most dangerous antagonist that a politician could have opposed to him . . . "For myself, I would rather have *Punch* at my back in any political or social undertaking than half the politicians of the House of Commons." In times of national agitation, public events usually formed the theme for the leading illustration, which could not be regarded as a caricature, in which personal peculiarities are exaggerated for the sake of amusement, but was a genuine cartoon, in which some notable personality is depicted in association with a great public event; not with the object of provoking laughter, but in order to arouse thought, judgment, and action. During the Great War these cartoons were like a clarion call sounding forth the indignation and conviction of the British people. Some examples taken from the year 1915 will illustrate this point, and show how similar the issues were to those which we now face. There is, for instance, the Commander standing on the deck of the U-boat 666. He looks down with a devilish leer at the forms of drowning

women, who lift up hands in vain for help, while beneath is the caption "This ought to make them jealous in the other Services; Belgium saw nothing better than this." Again, *The Two Ideals* by Bernard Partridge; in which the Kaiser, clad in armour, his hand on his sword, looks up into the face of the suffering Christ, nailed to the wayside cross. Such portrayals are not caricature, meant for laughter; these pictures have become dispensers of justice; the humorist is now a moralist. One further example may be taken from the poetry of Sir Owen Seaman; his ode *To a Zeppelin*, in the measure of Shelley's *To a Skylark*:

Like a monstrous bird  
Overseas thou comest,  
Melodies unheard  
Through the heavens thou hummest  
And bombing still dost soar, and soaring ever bombest.

Didst thou look for panic  
Counting on a scare  
Caused by that titanic  
Sausage of the air?  
Then let me tell thee, London hasn't turned a hair.

Lack of space compels us to pass over many other distinctive features of this periodical, which is a unique revelation of the British mind and character. One thinks, for instance, of the *Essence of Parliament*; the reviews of books and plays; the innumerable clever drawings on every page; the quips and smart sayings; misprints from local journals; lively sketches of every phase of social life, from episodes in the hunting field to affairs of rural cricket; and scenes of childhood ranging from the favoured children in stately homes to the sharp-witted youngsters of the slums.

It is inevitable that in its long history some criticisms should have arisen. There is a famous example of this quoted in Spielman's *The History of Punch*, where the editor was talking about "the heavy post-bag delivered each day at the office, though witticisms found among the wilderness of suggestions were desperately few." A friend asked "Do you never get anything good?" "Oh, sometimes . . . occasionally." "Then," drawled the other, "why don't you ever put one of them in?" But in spite of any adverse comments, the passing years have only added to the prestige of *Punch*, so that it has now become the world's greatest humorous journal. *Punch* has flourished

not only in the days when prosperity abounded, when it was easy to rejoice—"Good harvests beget good humour". But it has been a true friend in time of adversity, and is now a bright and confident companion, cheering our hearts in these dark days that have fallen upon us. May our descendants long have the privilege of looking upon the familiar cover, the same since 1849, where all the rollicking figures have smiling faces, with the one exception of Toby the dog, who no doubt feels that he must maintain at least the appearance of solemnity.