

ANTHROPOLOGY—PSYCHOLOGY

World's Oldest Joke

Radio Comics Owe a Lot to the Greeks, But for Oldest We Should Probably Have To Go Way Back to Stone Age

By EMILY C. DAVIS

SO YOU'VE heard the world's oldest joke, you think?

You turn the radio dial. The comedian is rushing to a ferry. He calls for a horse, leaps to the saddle, and rides aboard with nice sound-effect clatter.

"Hey!" yells the stooge. "Why the horse?"

"I want to get there faster!" pants the dumbbell rider.

"A chestnut!" you groan. And right you are. They laughed over that one before the fifth century A.D.

You go to a banquet. The toastmaster rises and launches into the first bright old speech of the evening. Something (maybe the dinner) reminds him, he says, of the lady whose hair was all her own—and paid for.

"I never knew he remembered Adam and Eve," you murmur to your dinner partner. You may be exaggerating. But the joke was good in the days of the Greeks.

Everybody thinks he has heard the world's oldest joke. But did you ever pin anybody down and try to find out what the world's oldest joke is?

Your correspondent has now tried. Donning gas mask, she has plunged into the dust in some pretty old volumes. Telegraph wires and phones have been busy, dragging Babylonian scholars away from their classes of students. Expeditions have been made into remote museum offices, with a reel of string to find the way out. Here is the result.

Stone Age Humor

The world's first intelligible joke was probably cracked by a Stone Age husband.

Now that can't be absolutely proved. But it can be argued with good ammunition.

Carolyn Wells, who is an authority on humor if not on ancient man, likes to imagine the Stone Age chuckling over this:

Cave Wife: Oh, come quick! Get your club! There's a sabre-tooth tiger chasing mother!

Stone Age Husband: And what the

deuce do I care what happens to a sabre-tooth tiger?

Of course, nobody thinks that Europe's old cave families got off neatly clipped cracks in just our manner. But once the cave man had a language worth the name, once he got past the grunt-and-gesture stage of communication, he could have fun with words. And probably did.

Primitive folk now alive give us our best glimpse of Stone Age life, anthropologists believe. That should include humor. Eskimos, for instance, are primitive in their way. They laugh a lot. What the Eskimos laugh at may be the very sort of thing that brightened the Stone Age.

Putting the question up to Henry B. Collins, Jr., Smithsonian Institution scientist who specializes in Far Northern expeditions, yielded some clues.

Eskimo Fun

"Eskimos can see a joke," said Mr. Collins. "They can even detect overtones in an idea. They are good at plays on words—not exactly puns. They enjoy a friendly jest, and while an Eskimo can't stand being ridiculed, he gets great sport laughing at some one else. Some of their humor is sardonic."

It sounds very human. It is, says Mr. Collins.

Blunders in pronouncing English give Eskimos some good laughs. One Eskimo group, he recalls, chuckled heartily over another Eskimo's bad English:

"He goes to the store for a crankshaft and B-B shot, and they give him cracker-jack and a baby shirt!"

Another day, Mr. Collins sent two Eskimos out hunting bird specimens for Smithsonian collections. He said very soberly that he would like a trumpeter swan, an Emperor goose, a Canada goose, a crane, and a white owl. The Eskimos' eyes twinkled over this tall order.

"I hope," said one quietly, "we don't see an ostrich."

Not all modern primitive peoples are equally humorous. And doubtless the Stone Age had its people who couldn't see a joke.

A mother-in-law joke may well be the

world's oldest. Gilbert K. Chesterton, noted essayist, once expressed his conclusion:

"The oldest jokes are those about the most serious subjects. Being married. Being hanged."

Modern primitives, again, provide a clue to what Stone Age man thought of mother-in-law. Anthropologists studying uncivilized tribes find the mother-in-law is apt to be a conspicuous personality. Often there are rigid taboos and conventions as to proprieties of dealing with a mother-in-law. Fathers-in-law are less vivid.

No Joke Books Then

Whether we are still using Stone Age jokes we may never know. Stone Age man wrote no joke books, nor did he leave any other direct evidence of his sense of humor—at least, nothing has yet come to light.

You may laugh at the fat ladies that Stone Age sculptors turned out. But archaeologists do not think that the little Venuses, as the images are now called, were funny to Stone Age man or his wife. The images were probably for serious magic.

Sumerians, Babylonians and Egyptians, who could write, ought to have left the earliest joke books. But they so rarely wrote down anything humorous that some scholars have doubted that they went in for joking. As more is learned of these ancients, their sense of humor is now defended.

"I believe definitely that the Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, and other ancient Near Eastern peoples did have a sense of humor," declared Dr. Waldo H. Dubberstein of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, in response to inquiry.

"Some evidence of their sense of humor," he added, "has been preserved in their literatures. However, it is not easy for us to understand their humor, or to recognize what parts in the preserved material are intended to be in a lighter vein. The Egyptians at times certainly used puns, which, however, are practically meaningless to us and certainly not translatable. Both in Egyptian and in the cuneiform writing of Babylonia and Assyria there are obscenities which might have been amusing to the ancients."

Nobody can doubt that the following Babylonian dialog between a yes-man slave and a changeable master was meant to be funny. It is funny to read now, and it is exactly the same style of comedy that Shakespeare used in scenes between Kate and Petruchio in "The Taming of the Shrew."

A bit of the Babylonian satire goes somewhat like this:

Master: Slave, obey me.

Slave: Yes, my master, yes.

Master: I want to love a woman.

Slave: Love, my master, love! A man who loves a woman forgets pain and worry.

Master: No, slave. I don't want to love a woman, after all.

Slave: Love not, my master, love not! A woman is a pit, a hole, a ditch. Woman is a sharp iron sword which cuts off the neck of a man.

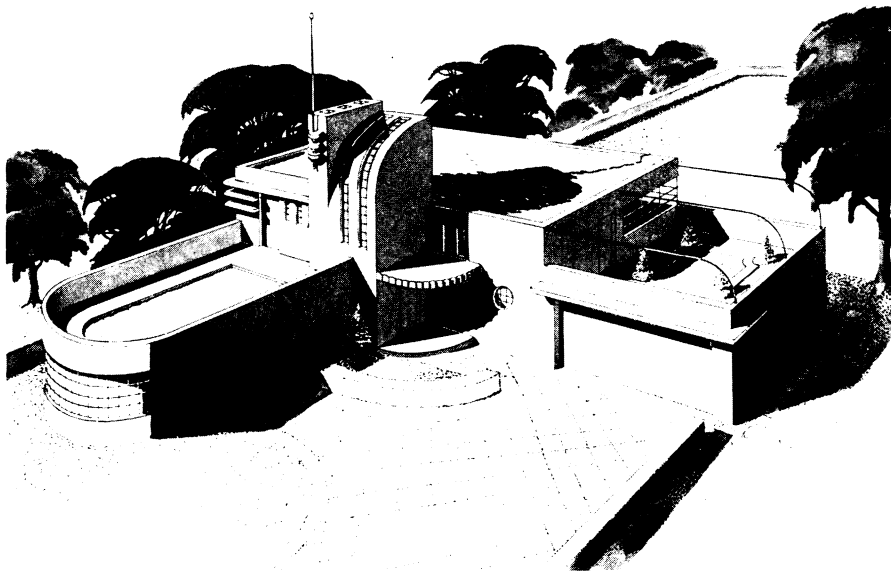
It ends by the master concluding, what's the use of it all, and deciding to kill himself and the slave; then changing his mind, as usual and saying he will kill only the slave. The yes-man gets in a last word. Still amiable, but with a neat dig, he sweetly hopes his master will live three days after him.

Ancient Gag-Lines

That the Babylonians and Assyrians had a sense of humor is also the verdict of Prof. E. A. Speiser, University of Pennsylvania specialist in Mesopotamian antiquity. He regards the master-and-slave dialog as an equivalent of our own comic gag lines. And very likely if the writers of ancient Mesopotamia had gone in for committing humor to clay tablets as painstakingly as they did their business records, historic events and didactic literature, there would be some good stories—maybe some that our own wisecrackers have missed. It is a pity that Babylonians didn't have barber-shop quips recorded. Prof. Speiser says that the barber shops were hotbeds of gossip, and many were the stories and plots circulated there, to judge by references in cuneiform writings. Some of it must have been funny.

A report that a clay tablet records the story of a Mesopotamian husband seeking his wife upstream during a flood, because she was so contrary, could not be confirmed either by Prof. Dubberstein or Prof. Speiser. Never heard of that joke in clay writings, they said.

Compared to the Stone Age or to Babylonia, Greek and Roman jokes seem scarcely old. Only 2,000 years or thereabouts; though some of the cracks that amused Athens and Rome may have ac-



ROOF POOLS

Don't be surprised to see placid pools of water on rooftops of the future, and don't charge them to faulty architecture. Modern roofs will be designed with water layers upon them for insulation, turning back sun's heat in summer and reducing the escape of inside heat in winter. One pound of water evaporated dissipates 1,100 B.T.U. of the sun's heat. A new type of roof, developed by the Koppers laboratories in Pittsburgh, holds pools of water for insulation, reducing the temperature of upper stories as much as 10 degrees in summer—the equivalent of air conditioning without the cost.

tually been far older than the jokers, if we only knew the whole truth. The life expectancy of a good story is something to awe even a statistician.

Most impressive feature of Greek and Roman humor is that we still have it with us. They even laughed about the snake that bit the dowager, with a result exactly like our modern jingle:

"The man recovered from the bite,

"It was the dog that died."

Greeks and Romans liked to pin their funny stories on famous people, as we do. They told it on Diogenes the Wise that he seated himself beside a target when a very bad archer was going to shoot.

"So he won't hit me," quipped Diogenes.

And orator Cicero, they said, was responsible for this one:

When told a certain lady was just 30 years old, Cicero nodded.

"It must be so," he agreed, "for I've heard it these 20 years."

In war, the Greeks kept up their spirits by soldier wit, some of it in Irish bull style. Soldier-historian Xenophon, describing a battle with King Croesus,

for example, told of an officer briskly commanding:

"Now, Hystaspes, we want quick work; for if we kill the enemy before they kill us, not one of us will lose his life."



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Xenophon in the fourth century B.C. knew how much a jokesmith could get away with. Some of his funny stories were dragged in by the ear, the way modern comedians use far-fetched build-ups to launch a gag.

According to one Greek professor, the Greeks were "the maddest, jolliest race of men that ever inhabited our planet." At any rate, they were kind enough to write down their little jokes.

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Science News Letter, February 10, 1940

ORNITHOLOGY

Birds Fleeing from War Gather on Swiss Lakes

BIRD refugees from Europe's war zones have gathered in the lake districts of Geneva, Neuchatel and Morat, and in the Neuchatel Jura marshes. Species not ordinarily seen in Switzerland, including heron, snipe and wild duck, are believed to have been driven out of Poland, the Rhineland and Alsace by the hostilities and by the presence of unusual numbers of men. Also in the Swiss lakes are coot, seagulls and other usual winter visitors from the Baltic.

Around the aviation training fields of England, the day-long roar of motors, and skies filled with training planes, do not seem to be disturbing the winter bird population, reports received indicate. The birds simply ignore the bigger and noisier human fliers.

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To encourage an increase in the birth rate, and to aid families, France now gives a birth premium equal to twice the father's monthly wage when the first child is born within two years after marriage, and is of French nationality.

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GENERAL SCIENCE

War Most Effective Means Of Perpetuating Dictatorships

War, Says Anthropologist, Destroys Humanitarianism And Saves the Weak and Easily Intimidated Man

WAR IS the most effective means of perpetuating dictatorships, declares Harvard's epigrammatic and thought-provoking anthropologist, Dr. Earnest A. Hooton.

Taking the gloomy view that our civilization is headed toward suicide and seems determined to go that way, Dr. Hooton's latest book, "Twilight of Man" (Putnam) says:

"Anthropology has some of the right answers for human problems—or, at least, can work them out. But I do not think that most men want to know them."

That the present world may be expected to leave the dictators stronger than before, not overthrown—as wishful thinking would have it—is predicted on these anthropological grounds: War gives free reign to the combative brute, suppressing humanitarianism. War destroys the most vigorous physically, "thus getting rid of the more turbulent elements and leaving as the breeding stocks those which are weaker and more easily intimidated."

Dr. Hooton's dismal conclusion that our all-but-swamped civilization actually does not wish to be rescued from head-long suicide is based on its tolerance of such conditions as crime and war.

Theoretically we hate war, he points out. But a universal and lasting peace would put the personnel of professional armies and navies out of a job, impoverish industries that profit by sale of war materials, not to mention robbing politicians and statesmen of wartime power and authority which they cannot attain in peace.

Crime, another predatory and destroying process, also flourishes because, apparently, mankind wants it that way. There is plenty of information as to the extent of crime and what it costs, says Dr. Hooton. Both are appalling. But those who profit by crime are in favor of crime. Those who are indifferent do nothing to stop it. And "no small fraction of our population makes an honest living out of the criminal activities of others."

Man's own organism, concludes Dr. Hooton sadly, is the only thing in nature that man does not want to improve. If the human race had any serious ambition in that direction, there would be today, somewhere on earth, a scientific institution for the study of human heredity big enough and well enough equipped and staffed to tackle the hard problem.

In the struggle between man's predatory and humanitarian feelings, Dr. Hooton lines up democracy on the humanitarian side, defining it as "the expression of humanitarian ideals in the government of civilized states." However, he sees democracy as a satisfactory system only when the individual citizens are intelligent enough to understand its ideals and principles and to subordinate themselves to the good of society.

"We do not have to look at recent events in Germany, Russia, and Italy to observe that deteriorated popular intelligence in nations attempting to carry on democratic forms of government makes them easy prey of dictators. That lesson has been plainly printed where he who runs may read in the histories of Latin American states for more than a century."

Refusing to regard the situation as hopeless, Dr. Hooton advises that "we go to work and try to develop a stock with a native fund of intelligence upon which we can re-build civilization and the biological future of man."

Science News Letter, February 10, 1940

Paper manufacturers will try using a small quantity of cotton in high-quality paper, thereby providing a new outlet for low-grade cotton.

● R A D I O

Lawrence K. Frank, assistant to the president of the Josiah Macy Jr., Foundation will tell "What's Wrong With the World" as guest scientist on "Adventures in Science" with Watson Davis, director of Science Service, over the coast to coast network of the Columbia Broadcasting System, Thursday, February 15, 4:15 p.m., EST, 3:15 CST, 2:15 MST, 1:15 PST.

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