

FEBRUARY, 1923

The Pessimism of the Comic Strip

*The Funny Papers Considered
as National, Social
and Psychological Documents*

By PATRICK KEARNEY



DOMESTIC LIFE IN THE COMICS

Father, in George MacManus's "Bringing Up Father", coming home late at night and receiving for affectionate greeting a large Japanese vase thrown at him by his furious wife

THE average man, we are told, by himself and by his interpreters, likes books and plays which end happily. He dislikes the modern school of realistic novelists, because they paint life in such doleful coloring. "We want entertainment, something to make us forget our troubles," it's a cry we are all familiar with. Besides, the realistic novelists are not true to life. In America it is supposed to be a happy, altogether sweet affair. The realistic writers are embittered cynics, ignorant of the true values of Americanism. Love is real, the home is beautiful and sacred, every man has equal opportunity, and we are all fine, upright, happy citizens. So let us have none of your pessimistic plays and stories of unhappy homes, of dissatisfied husbands, of downtrodden, helpless spirits, of misery and cruelty and hate.

Whoever has accepted such statements at their face value, as a genuine indication of the preferences and beliefs of the good American, must be bewildered by what is one, at least, of the most popular forms of American entertainment, the comic papers. Since the people who read and enjoy them are the same people who demand sweetness and happy endings in their plays and books and motion pictures, we are faced by the apparently irreconcilable fact that in all of the comics published we find no happiness whatever.

2
Pessimism of the Comic Strip
A Dearth of Happiness

THERE is no such thing as a happy ending in the comics. If happiness appears in them at all, it is always immediately afterward shown to be based on misconception, and serves only the dramatic purpose of heightening the miserable and unhappy culmination. If kindness appears, it is always followed by deplorable consequences, and if trust or confidence is given, the point of the joke is always that it is woefully abused. In the comics there is no such thing as a happy home, a successful marriage, a trustworthy friend, a wholesome child; honest motives and decent aspirations are seen only in the poor dupes, who are always promptly punished for their softness. Misery, quarrelling, physical suffering, oppression, cruelty, injustice and despair are the motives out of which is woven this extraordinarily popular form of entertainment.

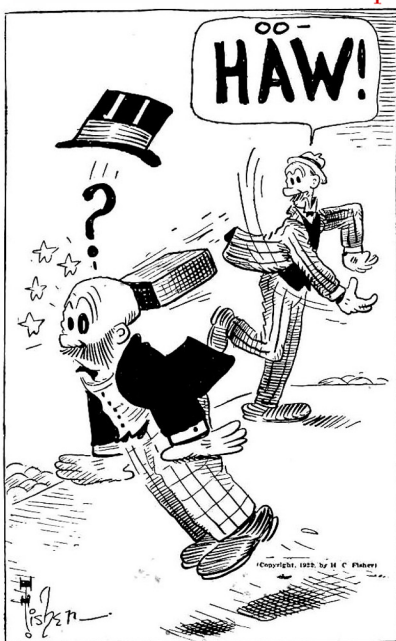


Married life as seen by Tad. The wife waiting for the husband with a ferocious malignant sneer

Whatever may be the treatment, the material is identically the material of the most pessimistic of the realistic writers, and it is to be assumed that there is a tremendous demand for this material, else the comics would not be published. Almost every paper in America carries a comic Sunday supplement, and several daily comic strips. There are in all about two hundred different comic sequences, and they are widely syndicated. The group of papers which carry no comics is considerably less than ten per cent, so it is safe to estimate that over ninety per cent of the newspaper readers read the comics almost daily. Fifty million people a day, it is estimated, attend motion pictures, and it will be seen that the audience of the comic papers far outnumbers this.

From a study which covers practically all the comic sequences, I have roughly estimated that sixty per cent deal with the unhappiness of married life, fifteen per cent with other problems of the home, such as disagreeable children, and in the other fifteen is grouped a miscellany of tragic subjects—mental or social inferiority, misfortune, and poverty. This last group contains a few subjects which carry no definite plan from day to day, but are based on transient jokes such as prohibition and the income tax.

In all of these comics the things which are presented as funny are the things which in life are considered heart-breaking. The picture of life they present is more ghastly, more mocking, more ironic than any novelist, however cynical or pessimistic, has dared to present. We can scarcely parallel it



FRIENDSHIP IN THE COMICS

The modern Damon and Pythias come to blows, every day of the year, to the delight of millions

in all literature save in the terrible plays of Strindberg and in the writings of the more sombre of the Russians. *The Dance of Death* is serious, while Tad's "For Better, For Worse" is funny, but considered as a picture of life, is the dramatist's portrayal more desolate? We laugh at Boob McNutt and at Happy Hooligan, and we avoid the theatre where Gorky's *Nachtsyl* is playing, but there is no fundamental difference between the lives so differently presented.

We are neither amused nor repelled by a representation unless we find in it some truth about ourselves or about our life, and we cannot avoid the conclusion that the life depicted in the comic papers is a mirror of the life actually led by those who read and enjoy them. The mirror may distort and disguise and exaggerate, but it is a mirror, and a fundamentally truthful one. And it is a curious but familiar trick of human psychology that we can enjoy seeing a mirrored representation of the things we flee from in life.

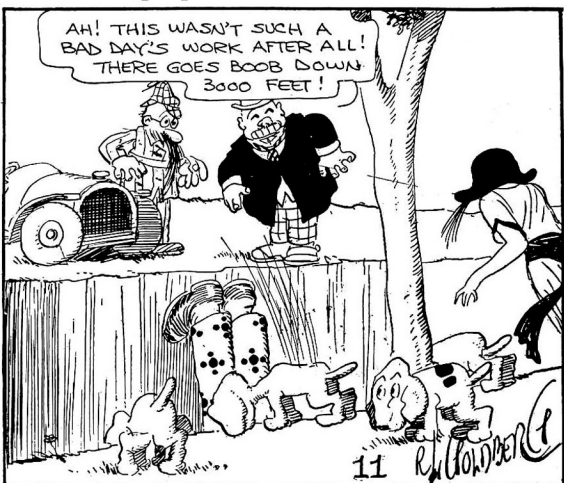
The inconsistency of the man who demands happiness and joy in his entertainment, and yet revels in the misery of the comic papers, is not unique. The same inconsistency, the same persistence of two directly opposed ideas or beliefs, appears in every divided soul. As William James pointed out, the man who weeps at the mother songs is very possibly the one who will let his mother die in the poorhouse; the crusader who worshipped woman as an ideal also invented the *ceinture de la chasteté*.

For while man demands pleasant lies in order to endure his miseries, he demands also some relief from the mental tension that this self-deception produces. Unable to face the unpleasant realities, he erects huge pretences, called ideals, and makes a great shouting in public and private to convince himself that they are true. He hires newspaper editors, popular novelists and playwrights, politicians and preachers to tell him over and over that his life is full of joy and achievement. But in his heart there yet remains a part that is unconvinced; sinister whisperings come to him from within saying

Pessimism of the Comic Strip

that all is not quite as he pretends it is, and though he lacks the courage and imagination frankly to face things and try to change them into something more satisfying, he does require moments in which the pink spectacles may be dropped and he may look on himself and on the facts of life as they are. He demands further, lest the sight of the naked facts frighten him, that they be so disguised that he can still pretend they are not facts at all. The disguise in which he can face them is the disguise of the joke, and the comic artist presents the facts so disguised and exaggerated that they appear not tragic, but funny.

Thus it is clear that the comic paper need not have (and seldom does have) any real *point* at all; nothing is required except that it present certain truths about life on the average in a manner sufficiently distorted to be called funny. Let us see how the more famous ones fulfil this purpose.



The Common Man. Goldberg's Boob McNutt, whose life is one long tragic defeat at the hands of the brutal and the unscrupulous

Domestic Life

THE largest group, dealing with married life, reaches its lowest level of painfulness in the series "For Better For Worse", by Tad, and perhaps its highest level in Briggs' series "Mr. and Mrs.". It includes such varied phases as "Bringing Up Father", by George MacManus, "The Gumps", "Let the Wedding Bells Ring Out", and dozens of minor ones. In the Briggs comic it seems that the people are really fond of each other, though they always quarrel, and practically all of them end with the two not speaking to each other. In Tad's pictures, on the other hand, it is difficult to discover any emotion in his married couple but hatred; there is so much bitterness and so little fun in all his work that it hardly crosses the line that divides the tragic from the comic.

The picture of marriage, then, that the comic papers present to us is, on the whole, of two people hating each other for no reason except that they are living together. If we are to assume from the universal popularity of these cartoons that this picture is in some degree a true one, we see that the novelists are giving us only a timid glimpse of the truth.

Just as the comics of this group criticise the relationship between men and women, another group, headed by the

Pessimism of the Comic Strip

Katzenjammer Kids, criticises the relationship between parents and children. In these comics unbelievably mischievous children play cruel and revolting tricks on their parents, and are terribly punished for it in the end. The common failure to solve the problems of this relationship is thus vividly dramatized. The parent faces the fact that children are annoying, and the child finds in the cartoons an outlet for his rebellious hatred of the injustice and stupidity of parents. Recent discoveries in child psychology seem to indicate that a child is never abnormally naughty or malicious except to revenge a slight or a cruelty; nine-tenths of the child's misdemeanours are in retaliation for injustices inflicted by a system which is devised for the convenience of adults; in the Katzenjammer Kids and similar comics we catch a glimpse of the magnitude of the hatred and vengeance which we have implanted.

Happy Hooligan, created by F. Opper, is probably the oldest cartoon now running. I wonder if Mr. Opper is aware of what he has done in making Happy almost the duplicate of his famous political character, Mr. Common People. Happy wears shabbier clothes, and a tin can on his head, but otherwise he is the same figure. The adventures of Happy are always the same. He strives for some kind of success, in love, in fortune, or in benefaction, but at the moment of achievement, usually through his own clumsiness, some catastrophe invariably occurs, and he is worse off than when he started. Often it is the law in the form of policemen with mighty clubs which frustrates him, innocent but helpless. Happy's human replica, who tries to deceive himself about his own ineffectuality by taking courses in "Will Power" and reading inspirational literature, who consoles himself for his helplessness in grappling with his social and economic environment by being a firm believer in democracy and the equality of man, can gaze into the mirror of Opper's cartoon and gain a temporary relief from the strain of his poor hypocrisy. Goldberg's "Boob McNutt", of course, mirrors inferior humanity in a similar manner, and there are many less famous examples.

In the group of which Mutt and Jeff may serve as a type, we get an indication of how the average citizen really feels about his relationship with his fellow men. The two characters are presumably friends, yet their efforts are concerned solely with attempts to injure or humiliate each other. Friendship in the comics is always like this. Occasionally one feels kindly toward the other, and attempts to do him a service; the kindness is badly abused, and the story ends with a note of even deeper antagonism.

So it will be seen from these typical subjects that, except for a few miscellaneous sequences, the comic papers deal with the great human relationships—between men and women, parents and children, men and men, and man and society, and present all four as unmitigated hell. The conclusions concerning the failure of our civilization to give happiness and peace to the majority are unavoidable.

Pessimism of the Comic Strip

It is evident that our newspaper comics remain the most stark and daring social criticism that has yet appeared in America. They flood the homes of the land every Sunday morning, mocking testimony of the falsity of the platitudes preached that very morning from the pulpits. The discontented citizen, by attending a sentimental play, can weep over what is not true, and then nicely restore the balance of nature by laughing over what is.

The very man who revolts against truth when it is presented as truth, revels in it when it is presented as jest, so I will rest with the suggestion that whoever has developed a social criticism which not only shows things as they are, but points the way out, will find, if he uses the comic papers, that he has an eager audience of millions, ready to listen to his wisdom, and greatly in need of it. As they stand at present, the comics serve the highly useful purpose of a national safety valve, permitting an acceptable discharge for an almost universal discontent.

V A N I T Y
F A I R