



Detail of "Christopher Anstey with his daughter" (1778)
by English portraitist William Hoare (1707-1792)

THE AMERICAN JEST BOOKS (1788, 1795)

"Why should you be resolved to be hipp'd or in the dumps? Why should you proclaim war against yourself and tear your wig or gouge out your eyes in a fit of desperation, least you should freeze or starve to death in this world? If you are in such a mopish habit you will here find a most powerful antidote to chase away the fumes of melancholy. Then, if you are sad do not suffer misfortune to thrust her pitchforks of despair into you, for, as the song says, as light heart and a thin pair of breeches will carry us through the world, brave boys." ~ from the preface to *Feast of Merriment. The American Jester* (1795)

Scholars tell us that there are jokes dating back to ancient Sumer, Egypt, and Greece. The Bible speaks of laughing to scorn and having in derision the rulers of this world (Psalm 2), yet the Old Testament is curiously devoid of overt humor. But not entirely. Some of Abraham's reactions to God at times come across as somewhat comical; such as when the Lord calls on him, Abraham responds with "Here Lord!" (as if God needed to be told this.) In the New Testament, some of the Apostles' misinterpretation of Jesus' messages on at least a couple occasions border on the farcical; as for example when Jesus states in Matthew 16: 6-7:

"Look out, and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' They concluded among themselves, saying, 'It is because we have brought no bread.'"

Or Luke 22: 35-38:

"He said to them, 'When I sent you forth without a money bag or a sack or sandals, were you in need of anything?' 'No, nothing,' they replied. He said to them, 'But now one who has a money bag should take it, and likewise a sack, and one who does not have a sword should sell his cloak and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, namely, 'He was counted among the wicked'; and indeed what is written about me is coming to fulfillment.' Then they said, 'Lord, look, there are two swords here.' But he replied, 'It is enough!'"

But for the context, these passages might have been worthy of inclusion in John Mottley's (1692-1750) *Joe Miller's Jest, or the Wits Vade-Mecum* (1739).

Of other ancient and post ancient antecedents we might further name, there are the Bon Mots of old Cato; the *Saturnalia* (first book) of Macrobius, from the early 5th century A.D, and the Greek joke book *Philogelos* from 4th or 5th century.

Yet despite its well-earned fame, *Joe Miller* was by no means the first collection of English humor. Literary historian and researcher Adam Smyth in an essay entitled "'Divines into dry Vines': Forms of Jesting in Renaissance England" lists the following as precursors to Mottley's compendium:

* *XII mery Jests, of the wyddow Edyth* (1573)

- * *Merie Tales newly imprinted & made by Master Skelton, Poet Laureat* (1567)
- * *Foole upon foole* (1600)
- * *Merry Conceited Jests of George Peele* (1607)
- * *Tarlton's Jests, and News Out of Purgatory* (1613)
- * *Robin Goodfellow, His Mad Pranks and Merry Jests* (1628)
- * *A Banquet of Jests, Or a Change of cheare* (1639)
- * *Wits Interpreter* (1655)
- * *The Complaisant Companion* (1674)
- * *Coffee-House Jests* (1677)
- * *London Jests* (1684)

So that there are “Joe Millers” even older than Joe Miller himself.

All of which it is necessary to mention in advance of our topic because there is probably no joke book that is *wholly* original or that does not reproduce jokes contained in some earlier volume.

Certainly (1) *THE AMERICAN JEST-BOOK, Containing a Curious Variety of Jests, Anecdotes, Bon-Mots, Stories, etc. Part I*, and (2) *THE MERRY FELLOW'S COMPANION, Being the Second Part of the American Jest-Book: Containing a Choice Selection of Anecdotes, Bon-Mots, Jests, Reparties [sic], Stories, &c.* are no exceptions to this rule. Printed in 1788 in Philadelphia, for Mathew Carey, as companion volumes (purchasable together or singly), the author-compiler of these two *American* literary firsts is anonymous. However, the texts suggest he was either a transplanted Englishman or at least an Anglophile-leaning American. In any event, his debt to old English joke books is unapologetically pronounced.

So also is that of the (also anonymous) author of *FEAST OF MERRIMENT. A New American Jester. BEING A MOST CURIOUS COLLECTION OF Witty Jests—Merry Stories—Smart Repartees—Droll Adventures—Funny Jokes—Wise Sayings—Anecdotes—Wagger[i]es—Whims—Puns—Bon Mots—and Laughable Tricks, Many of which were never before published[,] TO WHICH ARE ADDED A CLEVER COLLECTION OF CURIOUS EPITAPHS, HUMOROUS EPIGRAMS—AMOROUS AND FACETIOUS SONGS—CONUNDRUMS—TOASTS—SENITIMENTS, &c. &c Compiled principally for the Amusement of long Winter Evenings—to expel Care—drown Grief—create Mirth—and give the Reader a light Heart and chearful Countenance. By Well-Fed Domine Double-Chin, Esq.*, and which came out in 1795, also in Philadelphia. Possibly he was the same individual who brought forth *The American Jest Books* of 1788, but this is not clear.

Despite the titles of “American Jest Book” and “American Jester,” there are more references to foreign personages and settings than American ones, and included among the mirth imbued throng are Oliver Cromwell, Henry the fourth of France, Isaac Newton, La Fontaine, Queen Anne, Henry VIII, Charles II, Milton, prince of Condé, Louis XIV, William III, and Pope Clement XIV – to name some. Nonetheless, Americans do make a substantial appearance, and indeed not a few of the better jokes contained in these collections are genuinely theirs.

Notwithstanding the reputation of “Joe Miller” style jokes not aging very well, the truth of the matter is many of them still are actually and very much quite funny. Yet no less remarkable is the almost revolutionary tone such books have; acting as they do as levelers that bring together all strata of society into a common bond, and brother and sisterhood, of wit and humor; and in a mode of egalitarianism only the most radical revolutionaries could ever dream was even possible. Of value also are these books as history; since the vast majority of the anecdotes would appear to be based on real occurrences; through which we gain vivid and priceless mini-portraits and portrayals of what life and living circumstances were like in past centuries and eras.

Ostensibly, the key to what makes for a good jest, or what makes a joke work best, is when a mistaken belief or interpretation is expressed in a way that the person making it can be little faulted for his or her error. The same humor can be further enhanced or bolstered when the play on meanings creates a message that preaches a lesson, conveys a merited criticism, or laughably reveals someone's hitherto

hidden motive or intent. So that in this way, jokes (or at least *good* jokes) serve the no little useful purpose of making it possible not only for all that is hidden to be revealed, but to reveal such truths (even sad ones that need or cry to be known) in such a way that brings us joy or, to use that strangely old-fashioned and un-modern word, *merriment*.

The following are excerpts. But for the full and complete versions of *The American Jest-Book* (1788, vols. 1 and 2) and *The Feast of Merriment. A New American Jester* (1795), see the Evans Early American Imprint Collection, from the University of Michigan, at: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/>

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From *THE AMERICAN JEST-BOOK* (1788), part 1:

[1.] A BLACKSMITH in a country town, while shoeing a horse, was gazed at by a number of negroes as they were passing by; being a little piqued at being the object of the blacks' attention, and attempting to cast a slur upon them, he said, "*I believe hell's broke loose.*"—"Yes, massa," says one, "*I see de devil got hold de horse's foot.*"

2. A tradesman, whose love of money made him prescribe, as beneficial to his servants' health, and his own profit, *the practice of early rising*, one morning gave a poor *black man* a severe scolding for suffering the sun to shine on him while in bed—concluding his lectures with a severe threat, if he should ever after find him not up at sun rise. "At sunrise, massa?" asked the honest African, in the native simplicity of his soul—it was worth a casket of diamonds to him—"At sun-rise, massa? But suppose, massa, the sun rise before day-light—what shall I do den, sir?" The master made no reply, and *Sambo* was dismissed.

3. A very pious gentleman, but rather worldly, who lives not many miles from Boston, made it his constant practice to call up his family before day, in order that they might attend prayers, and be ready for their labour in good season: one morning having mustered his family rather earlier than common, he commenced family duties by prayer, during which, he returned thanks to the Lord, that they were brought to see the light of another day: an old negro standing by, cried out, "Top, top, vate a bit, no day yet, massa, sartin, no day yet."

5. When the French sleet, during the late war, entered the British channel, the English fleet under sir Charles Hardy, stood away, as if bearing for port; a jack tar, on board the Royal George, seeing this proceeding, went below, and bringing up his hammock, went to the head of the ship, which had the figure of George II. for its ornament—"Let me, old boy," said he, "*muffle you, for damn me but it would hurt you too much to see us running away.*"

6. Mr. Mackenzie, who has sometimes been called the Scots *Addison*, is by profession an attorney. He was lately in company with sir William Howe, in the Highlands of Scotland. After dinner, the conversation happened to turn upon poison; the various effects of different species were mentioned, and among others, those of ratsbane and laurel water. "We say in England," said the general to mr. Mackenzie, "that *ratsbane* will not kill a lawyer."—"And we say in Scotland," replied the wit, "that some generals are in no danger from *laurel.*"

7. A certain young gentleman, well known among the *choice spirits* of Charleston, South Carolina, for singing a good song, being lately recovered from an indisposition, which made him look rather down in the mouth, was accosted by an old acquaintance, with, "how are you, my buck? don't you feel very ugly at present?" "very ugly, indeed," replied the valetudinarian—"that's not to be wondered at neither," replies the other, "for ever since I first saw you, I always look'd upon you to be a *d—d ugly fellow.*"

8. Some years since, one *Tom Hide*, an Indian, famous for his cunning, went into a tavern at Brookfield, in Massachusetts, and after a little talk, told the landlord, he had been hunting, had killed a fine fat deer, and that if he would give him a quart of rum, he would tell him where it was.—The landlord did not wish to let slip so good an opportunity to obtain the venison, and immediately measured the Indian his rum—"Well," says Tom, "do you know where the great meadow is?" "Yes"—"Well, do you know, where the great

marked maple tree that stands in it, is?”—“Yes”—“Well there lies the deer.” A way posted the taverner with his team, in quest of his purchase: he found the meadow and the tree, it is true; but his searchings after the deer were in vain; and he returned no heavier, but in chagrin, than he went. Some days after, he met the Indian, and violently accused him of the deception. Tom heard him out, and with the coolness of a philosopher replied, “did you not find the meadow, as I said?”—“Yes,” “and the tree?”—“Yes”—“and the deer?”—“No.”—“Very good,” continues he—“*you found two truths to one lie, which was very well for an Indian.*”

18. Some years ago, immediately after the shock of a tremendous earthquake had alarmed the inhabitants of Grenada, the conversation turned at the governor’s table, upon the latent occasion of the above phenomenon; after every one of the company had assigned it to a different cause, an old negro woman was asked, what was her opinion on the subject; she replied, “*she thought the Great God was passing by, and the earth had made him a curtsy.*”

19. Several runaway negroes being condemned to be hanged, one was offered his life, on condition of being the executioner. He refused it: he would sooner die. The master fixed on another of his slaves to perform the office. “Stay,” said this last, “till I prepare myself.” He instantly retired to his hut, and cut off his wrist with an axe. Returning to his master, “now,” said he, “compel me, if you can, to hang my comrades.”

20. In the year 1785, a farmer of Bucks’ county, assisted by his people, working in harvest, killed a rattle-snake; and soon after having occasion to go home, took up by mistake his son’s jacket, and put it on; the son was a stripling, and both their jackets were made of the same kind of cloth. The old man being warm, did not button the jacket until he got to the house, then found it much too little for him; he instantly conceived the idea, that he had been imperceptibly bitten by the rattle-snake, and swelled from the effects of the poison; he grew suddenly very ill, and was put to bed. The people about him were very much alarmed, and sent for two or three physicians; one of whom poured down his throat a pint of melted lard—another gave him a dose of wild plantain—and the third made him drink hoar hound tea, made very strong. Notwithstanding all, he grew worse and was to appearance on the verge of dissolution, when his son came home, with the old gentleman’s jacket hanging like a bag about him. The whole mystery was at once unravelled, and the poor farmer, notwithstanding his drenches of hogs’-fat, plantain and hoarhound, was well in an instant.

21. While doctor *Franklin* was at Paris last war, he happened to mention at his table, that he had but little Madeira wine; upon which an American guest sent him three dozen. A few days afterwards, this gentleman was thrown into the Bastille, and confined there several weeks without the least intimation of what he was accused of; only on his earnest enquiry, one of the officers told him he was afraid it would go hard with him, and asked him whether he was a catholic, and would be attended by a priest, which he, being a protestant, refused. After some time a bottle of wine was brought, and he was asked whether he knew what wine it was, and was ordered to drink it: he complied, and answered that he believed it was some of his own Madeira. At length he was released, and then he discovered that doctor Franklin had been taken ill, soon after he received his present, and it was imagined that he had been hired by the *English court to poison the doctor.*

23. During the late war, an elderly gentleman from New-York, who was at bottom a staunch loyalist, but so fond of argument, that he would occasionally take up the subject of the war and argue upon it either *pro* or *con*—being once at a coffee house in London, when that topic was in agitation, and then defending the cause of the Americans, one of the company, more sanguine than the rest, roundly asserted, there could be no doubt of conquering the Americans, notwithstanding the superiority of their numbers; for that one Englishman could drive *an hundred* of them.—Pray, do you think sir, said the Yankee, you could atchieve so noble an exploit? Perhaps not, replied the hero, upon so great a number—Could you drive *fifty*?—No—Could you drive *twenty*?—No—Could you drive *one*?—O yes. by G—d, I could do that easily at any time.—Then, sir, said the old gentleman, as you are an *Englishman*, and I am an *American*, if you please, drive *me*. The political braggadocio, drew in his horns, and sneaked off.

24. During the late war, an old citizen of Charleston happened to fall into the hands of a party of British troops, in one of their excursions to Dorchester. On the party's returning towards town, they stopped to refresh themselves at a plantation on Goose creek; and the soldiers began to jeer their prisoner for rebelling against the king. He not wishing to offend them (as his life had been threatened, and they were then preparing a halter for a prisoner) answered, that he had enjoyed many happy days under the reign of George the second, and some agreeable *moments* since the present *gentleman* came to the crown. The commanding officer, a Caledonian, who was supposed to be asleep, imagining the prisoner intended to degrade the royalty of his king, jumped up in a violent rage, and asked how he had the audacious assurance of presuming to call the king a *gentleman*, and told him that if such another word escaped his lips, he would instantly cut him to atoms. The prisoner being terrified at the menaces of this Highland butcher, replied, that he had no intention of casting any reflection on his majesty, as he had *always supposed him to be a gentleman*.

25. Colonel Cockburn rose from a private soldier to the rank which he enjoyed when St. Eustatius was re-taken.—Of this circumstance he was continually boasting, and upon occasions where it proved more pride than humility.—One day in the island of St. Eustatius, he was reviewing his troops, and took notice of a man in the ranks who was excessively dirty. —Going up to him, he said, “how dare you, you rascal, appear on the parade with that dirty shirt? it is as black as ink.—Did you ever see me so nasty, with such a dirty shirt, when I was a private man?”—“*No, your honour, to be sure I never did,*” answered the man—“*But then your honour will be pleased to recollect, that your honour's mother was a washerwoman.*”

26. A person of the name of Palmer, who was a lieutenant in the tory new levies, was detected in the camp at Peek's-kiln. Governor Tryon, who commanded the new levies, reclaimed him as a British subject, represented the heinous crime of condemning a man commissioned by his majesty, and threatened vengeance in case he should be executed. General Putnam wrote him the following pithy reply:

Sir,

Nathan Palmer, a lieutenant in your king's service, was taken in my camp as a *spy*—he was tried as a *spy*—he was condemned as a *spy*—and you may rest assured, sir, he shall be hanged as a *spy*. I have the honour to be, &c.

ISRAEL PUTNAM.

P. S. Afternoon—He is hanged.

27. A lady in Charleston, South Carolina, said, before one of her little girls, that mrs. T—(a rosy widow, whom they visited in the next street) was a very good sort of a woman, and a very entertaining companion, *when she had not a drop in her eye.*

A few days after, mrs. T—came to the house, and little Charlotte took more notice of her than she usually did. She stared in her face, indeed, in so pointed a manner, that the lady could not help being desirous of knowing, “what she saw in her countenance, to occasion so critical an examination.”

“*I am looking,*” replied the child, with a pretty innocent voice, “*to see if there is a drop in your eye.*”

28. A gentleman riding out one morning early in a place where he happened not to be acquainted; coming up by the side of a young woman who was carrying a pig in her arms, and hearing it scream violently, addressed her thus: “why, my dear, your child cries amazingly!” The young woman, turning round, and looking him in the face, said, with a smile upon her countenance. “I know it, sir, *it always does so, when it sees its daddy.*”

30. The Peruvians had a custom, on the death of any distinguished person, to inter along with him to keep him company, the servant that had been attached to him in his life. A young man who had lost his master, and who had also lost an eye, was selected to have the honour of accompanying him to the other world: but not being ambitious of the preference, he exclaimed—“do you know what you are doing? are you not wanting in respect to my master, thus to choose a person *who has but one eye to serve him in the other world?*” The Peruvians consulted, and the young man saved his life.

34. The following example of laudable pride in a soldier, was mentioned in a letter from an officer of the American army, written soon after the battle of Monmouth.—A soldier in that memorable action, fell into the hands of the English cavalry, when one of them knocked him down, and attempted to pierce him through the back with his sword,—‘*Strike me in the heart,*’ said he, turning briskly about, ‘*that my friends may not blush for me after my death.*’

36. Two chimney-sweeps having a bridge to pass, where the toll for one of them amounted to all the money they could raise between them, one of the fellows got into the foot-bag, which the other taking on his back, marched up to the gate, paid the single fare, and passed off with his load unsuspected.

37. The day on which the federal convention agreed to the new constitution, presented to the public, the great dr. Franklin asked a gentleman who sat next to him, whether he had taken notice of the picture of the sun in the recess at the back of the president’s chair? He replied that he had, but not with a particular attention. The doctor then observed that painters had been puzzled to paint a single sun in such manner that the spectator could determine whether it was a rising or a setting sun; he added, that he had viewed the picture before mentioned as often as he had been in the hall, and never had been able to come to a determination, but now he was sure it was a *rising sun*.

42. An Indian chief of the Creek nation, being once appointed to negotiate a treaty of peace with the people of South Carolina, was desired by the governor and council to speak his mind freely, and not to be afraid, for he was among friends. “*I will speak freely, I will not be afraid,*” said he, “*for why should I be afraid among my friends, who never am afraid among my enemies?*”

43. The Elizabeth, an English man of war, would infallibly have been lost in the shoals on the coast of Florida, in 1746, had not captain Edwards ventured into the Havannah. It was in time of war, and the port belonged to an enemy. “I come,” said the captain to the governor, “to deliver up my ship, my sailors, my soldiers, and myself, into your hands: I only ask the lives of my men.” “No,” said the Spanish commander, “I will not be guilty of so dishonourable an action. Had we taken you in fight, in open sea, or upon our coasts, your ship would have been ours, and you would be our prisoners. But, as you are driven in by stress of weather, and are come hither for fear of being cast away, I ought, and do forget that my nation is at war with yours. You are men, and so are we; you are in distress, and have a right to our pity. You are at liberty to unload and refit your vessel; and, if you want it, you may trade in this port to pay your charges: you may then go away, and you will have a pass to carry you safe beyond the Bermudas. If, after this, you are taken, you will be a lawful prize; but, at this moment, *I see in Englishmen, only strangers, for whose humanity claims our assistance.*”

49. On the thirtieth of January, (the martyrdom of king Charles the first) Quin used to say, *every king in Europe would rise with a crick in his neck.*

55. While a sailor’s sentence was pronouncing, who committed a robbery on the highway, he raised a piece of rolled tobacco to his mouth, and held it between his teeth. When the sentence was finished, he bit off a piece of the tobacco, and began to chew it with great unconcern.—“Sirrah! (said the judge, piqued at his indifference) do you know that you are to be hanged in a very short time?” “So I hear,” said the sailor, squirting a little tobacco juice from his mouth at the same time.—“Do you know (rejoined the judge) where you shall go when you die?”—“I cannot tell, indeed, an’t please your honour,” said the sailor.—“Why then (replied the judge, with a tremendous voice) I will tell you, you will go to hell.”—“If I should, (replied the sailor, with perfect tranquility) I hope, please your honour, I shall be able to bear it.”

57. The noted Tom Bell, while on Long-Island, passed part of the time by the name of Brandt Schuyler, an alderman of New-York,—a custom of passing by other men’s names being very common to him. Some time after his passing by the said Schuyler’s name, he was taken up for some crime he had committed, and brought to the jail at New-York.—Curiosity was such with men in general, to see so noted a person, that many visited him while in confinement: among the rest was Brandt Schuyler, who, after a variety of questions, asked him, whether what he heard was true, namely, that you, mr. Bell, have passed in Long-Island by my name? upon which Bell answered, “Yes, I passed by your name, *but as I never was able to get even a drink of butter-milk by it, I soon left it off, and am determined to make use of it no more.*”—This

so confounded the alderman that he made no reply, but walked off immediately—after which he was called the *butter milk alderman*.

67. Charles Fox, when a boy, delighted in arch tricks. In his walks, one Easter Monday, meeting a *blind* woman, who was crying puddings and pies, he took her by the arm and said, “Come along with me, dame, I am going to Moorfields, where, this holiday-time you may chance to meet with good custom.” “Thank’ee kindly, sir,” says she. Whereupon he conducted her to a church, and placed her in the middle aisle. Now, says he, you are in Moorfields; which she believing to be true, immediately cried out, “Hot puddings and pies! hot puddings and pies!—Come they are all hot,” &c. which caused the congregation to burst into a loud fit of laughter: and the clerk came and told her, she was in church; “You are a lying son of a whore,” says she; which so enraged the clerk, that he dragged her out of the church; she cursing and damning him all the while; nor could she believe, him ’till she heard the organs play.

73. At the last coronation, a gentleman paid six guineas for a feat in Westminster Abbey: the instant the king entered, he turned to a gentleman beside him, and protested he was the greatest fool in Britain; “Indeed?” said the gentleman: “how so, sir?” Why, sir, I have paid six guineas for a seat here; when his majesty, who can much better afford it, comes in for a *crown!*

74. When the late dauphin of France said to the facetious duke of Roquelaure, “Stand farther off, Roquelaure, for you smell very strong;” the duke replied, [“] I ask your pardon, sir, ’tis *you that smell, not I.*”

93. As a certain clergyman, who shall be nameless, was performing divine service in his parish church, on the coast of Essex, where is a variety of shipwrecks, and where the people are well known to be very fond of plunder; it so happened that the alarm was given of A WRECK! A WRECK! with which the congregation were much more *moved* than with the parson’s sermon; he perceiving it, opened the pulpit door, walked down stairs, and begged they would stay to hear five words more, which he had to say; the people consenting, the parson said, *Let us all start fair.*

100. When general Lee commanded a body of the army at an action in the Jerseys, he observed one of his aid-de-camps to be rather fearful of the danger he was in, from executing the general’s orders. By way of encouragement, he told his aid-de-camp, that in one action the king of Prussia had twenty aid-de-camps slain, and therefore begged he would be courageous. O, replied the latter, I was not at all alarmed for myself, but was rather apprehensive, that the Congress could not spare so many.

115. An ignorant person being told that an acquaintance of his had died *insolvent*—“That must be a falsity,” said he; “Jack did not die *in Solvent*, for, to my certain knowledge, he died in Flanders.”

121. During the march of a detachment of the American army, through New-Jersey, in the late war, a *silver spoon* was missed in a house where a party of the troops had been billeted.

Suspicion pitched on a soldier, who was seen to have entered the apartment where the spoon was kept—and he was accused of the theft:

“*May I never meet salvation*”—exclaimed the soldier—“*May I be sunk into the endless regions of perdition, if I have seen—heard of—or taken your spoon.*”

“But no one else could have taken it.” replied the host.

The soldier again went through the “manual” of his attestations of innocence—and imprecations against himself if he was guilty.

The landlord looked astonished—and being an honest man, was obliged to believe the soldier—but just on the point to leave the examination—he, taking hold of the button of the soldier’s coat, and looking him in the face—said—“*Now say upon your honour, that you have not got my spoon—and I shall be satisfied.*”

“Upon my honour,” said the soldier to himself, after thinking for a few minutes—“Upon my honour”—Poh! Blast you, he cried—pulling the spoon from his pocket, and giving it to its owner—“*Blast your spoon—take your spoon and be d—d.*”

The host stared with surprise—and while lamenting that the great principles of religion and morality, should have less weight in the mind of an intelligent being, than the principles of what he conceived to be a mere sound—the soldier swung his knapsack, and joining the corps, marched off.

123. A soldier in the late war having stolen a shirt from a farmer, to whom he would not make restitution—“Well, (said the farmer) if you keep it, you will pay for it in this world or in the next.—“Faith, (replied the soldier) if you will trust so long, I will take another.”

125. A clergyman in New Jersey, owned a negro by the name of *Quash*, who was by no means fond of working, and one day told his master he conceived it a hardship, “dat he poor negar man mus worke so hard, and massa do noting.” You are mistaken *Quash*, my labour is more fatiguing than your’s; I do head work, and your’s is merely bodily exercise. This hint was sufficient for *Quash*. The next day he was ordered into the woods to procure fuel—but *Quash* staying longer than usual, the parson repaired to the woods to see what detained him—when behold! the first object that presented itself to his view was *Quash* astride on a large maple log in a pensive attitude. When he enquired the cause, *Quash* starting up and rubbing his *midnight brow*, oh! massa me—me have been doing head work.—Well let me hear what your head has done.—Suppose massa, dere be five pigeons on dis tree, and you take a gun and soot two of dem, how many dere be left? Why three, you old sinner.—No massa, dem toder tree fly away.

170. Two young soldiers had deserted from the American army and returned to their father’s house. Their father incensed at this action, loaded them with irons, and conducted them himself to their general, Lord Stirling. He did what every officer would have done in his place; he pardoned them. The father, as patriotic, but less austere than a Roman, was happy to preserve his children; nevertheless he seemed astonished, and approaching the general—“My lord, (says he, with tears in his eyes) *it is more than I hoped for.*”

180. A governor of Virginia being saluted by a negro in the streets of Williamsburg, and immediately returning the salute, “how,” said a gentleman, “do you demean yourself so far as to salute a slave?”—“Undoubtedly,” answered the governor, “I should be very sorry if a slave were to surpass me in civility.”

183. A German bishop went to Rome in hopes of obtaining from the Pope the honour of a cardinal’s hat. Being disappointed, he returned to his diocese, where complaining one day of a head-ach, which he had contracted on the road, No wonder, said a bye-stander, that his grace is so ill, since he travelled from Rome to Germany without a hat.

189. A Jew had a servant, who, having a relation lately dead, as usual neglected shaving—“Ephraim, why do you not shave?” was the master’s interrogation; “my relation is dead, sir, and you know Moses commanded”—“*Moses commanded!*” do not tell me about Moses. I say if Moses commanded any such thing, *he was a very slovenly fellow.*”

212. The late general Elbert of Georgia, having burst a blood vessel, thought it necessary to employ another physician, to consult with the gentle|man who usually attended him. After they had considered his situation, “Well, gentlemen, (said he) what do you think of me?” “We are sorry to inform you, that if you continue to bleed as you have done for some time past; you cannot hold out above six hours longer.” This answer would have had an awful effect on most men, but to one whose life had always been spent in acts of charity, and hospitality, it only produced this reply, “If I am so soon to die, ’tis no small alleviation to your intelligence, *that I shall die like a soldier.*” He died in about five hours after.

232. As a pretty large number of culprits were one day going to take their last degree at Tyburn, the wife of one of them pressed through the crowd, and told the sheriff she had come to see her poor husband executed, and begged “that he might be hanged first in the morning, as she had a great way to go home.”

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From *THE AMERICAN JEST-BOOK* (1788), part 2:

1. THE brave, but eccentric general Lee had so little regard to the rules of politeness and civility, that he always spoke his opinions unreservedly, without regarding the offence or pain they might excite. Being one night at Albany, drinking with an old Scotch officer, when he began to mellow with the wine, he told his companion that he had one fault, which he begged him to overlook, which was to abuse the Scotch when he

was in liquor. In troth, replied the officer, I shall readily forgive your fault, if you will overlook mine; it is, when I hear any person impertinently abusing Scotland or Scotchmen, when I am drunk or sober, I cannot refrain from laying my cane soundly over his shoulders. Now I will readily pardon your fault, if you will pardon mine. This seasonable hint made the general very polite the remainder of the night.

2. During the late war, there lived in New-Jersey, a remarkable dwarf. Though upwards of twenty years old, he was not more than three feet high, and every way small in proportion. This curiosity drew great crowds of people to see him, and amongst the rest, general Washington. The hero conversed some time with Tommy Thumb; asked several questions; and generally received pertinent answers. The general wished to know his political sentiments, and asked whether he was whig or tory?

I cannot say, sir,
said this man of might:
I have not yet taken an *active part*.

3. Soon after the Massachusetts insurgents retreated from their attack on general Shepard, at Ordnance-hill, and when it was hourly expected they would renew it, Shays sent a flag to general Shepard, requesting to have delivered to him the bodies of the killed, amounting to five. The officer, who had been sent by general Shepard, to receive the flag, on the request being made for five slain, with the utmost *sang froid* imaginable replied, Present general Shepard's compliments to captain Shays: and inform him, that he cannot furnish him with *five* dead, he having no more than *four*: but that if captain Shays will please to attack him again, he will then furnish him with another, and as many more as he shall desire.

10. Some officers of the army who had served during the American war, walking in Hyde-Park, dressed in their regimentals, met a man deformed by a haunch on his back, when one of them jocularly clapping his hand thereon, exclaimed, "What have you got here, my friend!" To which the other, with a countenance expressive of the insult, replied, "Bunkers hill—damn your red coat."

12. One Indian happened to kill another. The brother of the deceased called upon the murderer, and seeing a woman and children in his hut, asked whose they were? The murderer declared them to be his family. The other then said, though his brother's blood called for revenge, yet as the children were young, and not able to provide for their mother and themselves, he would remain, deaf to these calls for a while; and so left them. Belonging to the same tribe, they continued to live sociably together until the eldest son of the murderer killed a deer in hunting. So soon as the brother of the deceased was informed of this, he again called on the murderer, and told him, that his brother's blood called so loud, that it must be obeyed, especially as his son, having killed a deer, could support the family. The murderer said he was ready to die, and thanked the other for so long a delay: on which the wife and children broke into tears. The murderer reproved them for their weakness, and particularly his son—saying to him, did you shed tears when you killed the deer? and if you saw him die with dry eyes, why do you weep for me, who am willing to suffer what the custom of our nation renders necessary? With an undaunted countenance he then called on the brother of the deceased, to strike; and died without a groan!

14. About four years before the Shawano Indians were forced to remove from the late Savannah town, they took a Muskohge warrior known by the name of old Scraney—They bastinadoed him in the usual manner, and condemned him to the fiery torture. He underwent a great deal, without shewing any concern: his countenance and behaviour were as if he suffered not the least pain, and was formed beyond the common laws of nature. He told them, with a bold voice, that he was a very noted warrior, and gained most of his martial preferment at the expence of their nation, and was desirous of shewing them in the act of dying, that he was still as much superior to them as when he headed his gallant countrymen against them. That although he had fallen into their power, in forfeiting the protection of the divine being, by some impurity or other, when carrying the holy ark of war against his devoted enemies; yet he had still so much remaining virtue, as would enable him to punish himself more exquisitely than all their despicable ignorant crowd could do, if they gave him liberty by untying him, and would hand to him one of the red hot gun barrels out of the fire. The proposal, and his method of address, appeared so exceedingly bold and uncommon, that his request was granted. Then he suddenly seized one of the red hot barrels, and brandishing it from side to side, he forced his way through the armed and surprised multitude, and leaped down a prodigious steep and high bank into a branch of the river, dived through it, ran over a small island, and passed another branch,

amidst a shower of bullets, from the commanding ground where fort More, or New Windsor garrison, stood, and though numbers of his eager enemies were in close pursuit of him, he got to a brambly swamp, and in his naked, mangled condition, reached his own country. He proved a sharp thorn in their side afterwards till the day of his death.

15. In the western expedition of 1758, general Forbes, who commanded it, was, by his infirmities, reduced so low as to be taken up in a litter.—The Indians, who saw him, were astonished that a warrior could not walk:—this so disgusted them at their commander, that they remonstrated against him. Their old friend, colonel Weiser, to appease them, made this sagacious reply: “This man is so terrible in war, that we are obliged to confine him, and let him write his orders; for if he was let loose on the world, he would deluge it with blood.”

17. A negro servant being asked what colour he believed the devil was? Why, replied the African, the white men paint him *black*, we say he is *white*; but from his great age, and being called *Old Nick*, I should suppose him *grey*.

18. A negro had so cruel a master, that he dreaded the very sight of him. After exercising a variety of tyrannical acts among his slaves, the tyrant at last died, and left his son heir to his estates. Some time after his death a gentleman meeting the negro, asked him how his master behaved; I suppose, says he, *he is a chip of the old block*. No, no, says the negro, *Massa be all block himself*.

19. When the British and American armies were near each other in the neighbourhood of German-Town, five Hessian soldiers, who had straggled into the woods, and lost their way, were met by an Irishman, who was a private in general Washington’s army: he immediately presented his piece, and desired them to surrender; they supposing that he was supported by a party, did as he directed, and threw down their arms. He then marched them before him to the American lines, and brought them to head quarters, general Washington wondered at the spirit and achievement of the fellow, and asked him, how he, a single man, could capture five? Why, says the Irishman, *please your excellency, by Jasus I surrounded them!*—The General laughed heartily, gave him a sum of money, and promoted him to a halbert.¹

24. An extravagant young fellow, being accused by one of his friends, of mismanaging his estate, who said I am sorry to see you carry yourself so; for I see, you have all the properties of a prodigal: Nay, says the other, pr’ythee don’t say so, for I never yet fed with swine: true, said he, but the reason was, because *nobody would trust you with their swine*.

26. A traveller, relating some of his adventures, told the company, that he and his servant made fifty wild *Arabians* run; which startling them, he observed, that there was no such great matter in it; for, says he, we ran, and they ran after us.

38. One said he was very fond of *women in general*; but that an *African girl* with whom he got acquainted upon the Gold Coast, pleased him better than all the rest of the fair sex put together.

39. A person in company said to another, you are a d—d scoundrel. The other replied, Gentlemen, you must not regard what that man says, *he is only talking to himself*.

40. In admiral Hawke’s last engagement with the French, a sailor on board one of the ships had a leg shot off, whereupon one of his mess-mates took him down to the surgeon. He took his leg off the deck and put it under his arm; he was no sooner brought down, but another of his mess-mates shook his head, and told him he was very sorry he had lost his leg. That is an arrant lie, you son-of-a-bitch, replied he, for I have got it under my arm.

¹ [Edit. Note. This is, of course, is essentially the same joke -- indeed a much earlier printed version -- as that found in “A Revolutionary Joe Miller” (see *Continental Army Series*, vol. I), and which we had drawn from *King’s Mountain and Its Heroes* (1881) by Lyman Draper, pp. 126-128.]

85. Soon after Sir William Johnson had been appointed superintendant of Indian affairs in America, he wrote to England for some suits of clothes, richly laced. When they arrived, HENDRICK, king of the Mohawk nation, was present, and particularly admired them. In a few succeeding days, Hendrick called on Sir William, and acquainted him that he had had a dream. On Sir William's enquiring what it was, he told him that he had dreamed that he had given him one of those fine suits he had lately received. Sir William took the hint, and immediately presented him with one of the richest suits. The Indian chief, highly pleased with the generosity of Sir William, retired. Some time after this, Sir William, happening to be in company with Hendrick, told him, that he had also had a dream. Hendrick being very solicitous to know what it was, Sir William informed him, that he had dreamed that he (Hendrick) had made him a present of a particular tract of land (the most valuable on the Mohawk river) of about 5000 acres. Hendrick presented him with the land immediately, but not without making this shrewd remark: "Now, Sir William, I will never dream with you again, you dream too hard for me."

90. Two gentlemen having a dispute about religion, one said to the other, I wonder, sir, you should talk of religion, when I'll hold you ten guineas you can't say the *Lord's Prayer*. Done, said the other. The money was deposited, and the gentleman began with, *I believe in God*, and so went cleverly through the creed: Well, said the other, *I own I have lost; I did not think he could have done it*.

286. A lawyer and a physician having a dispute about precedence, referred it to Diogenes, who gave it in favour of the lawyer, in these terms: *Let the thief go before, and the executioner follow*.

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From *FEAST OF MERRIMENT. A New American Jester* (1795):

As a New-England sea-captain and an englishman were conversing together, the latter says to the former, Do you know what we Englishmen call you yankies? He was answered in the negative. Why, continued he, we call you pumpkins. Do you, says the yankee, and do you know what we call you englishman? No, truly. Why we call you squashes. Squashes, squashes, what are they? Pumpkins bastards, replied the yankee. [p. 12]

The celebrated Dr. Franklin sent word, one christmas morning to some of his literary friends that he intended to kill a turkey for their entertainment by a discharge of one of his electrical batteries, and that the process of cooking might be carried on equally as philosophical, he intended to have it roasted by a fire kindled with the electrical fluid. He began the business of charging his bottles, but before he had quite completed the process, by some casualty the whole battery was discharged through his own body. He was so violently stunned by this misfortune that he lay, a considerable length of time, in stare of insensibility. Shortly after the Doctor had recovered his senses, some of his friends coming into the room enquired what was the matter! Ah, gentlemen, replied he, I informed you of my intention to kill a turkey by electricity, but, alas, my design miscaried and I had like to have killed a *goose*. [p. 12]

A wild young nobleman being in company with Shakespear, desired leave to toast the d—I: with all my heart replies our wag, I have no objection to any of your lordship's *friends*. [p.13]

During the late war, when draughts were made from the militia, to recruit the continental army, a certain captain gave liberty to the men, who were draughted from his company, to make their objections, if they had any, against going into the service. Accordingly, one of them, who had an impediment in his speech, came up to the captain, and made his bow. "What is your objection?" said the captain. "I ca a-an't go, answers the man, because I st-st-stutter." "Statter! says the captain; you don't go there to talk but to fight." "Aye, but they'll p-p-put me upon g-g-guard, and a man may go ha-ha-half a mile before I can say, Wh-wh-who goes there?"—"Oh, that is no objection, for they will place some other sentry with you, and he can challenge, if you can fire." "Well, b-b-but I may be ta-ta-ken, and run through the g-g guts, before I can cry qu-qu-quarter." This last plea prevailed, and the captain out of humanity, (laughing heartily) dismissed him. [pp. 101-102]

Two sailors, who were travelling one fall to Philadelphia, stopped on the road at the inn of an historical old gentleman, a distant relation of Baron Munchausen, and called for a dinner. In the interim our host broached his magazine of miracles, and informed our roving tars, that had they arrived sooner he could have shewn them the greatest wonder in the known world. "I was blessed this year, said he, with such a miraculous and luxuriant crop of Indian corn, that in ploughing it I was obliged to have a candle carried before me at noon day, in order to light me along the furrows, for such was the darkness occasioned by the monstrous leaves of corn. When husking time came on, the corn had grown to such an amazing height, that I was under the necessity of having ladders erected against the stalks before I could have it gathered." "By St. Christopher, replied one of the tars, who was not inclined to be out done, that is not half so great a wonder as we have seen, for before our late arrival on the American coast, we were overtaken by such a hard gale of wind, that it took ten men to hold one man's hair upon his head." [p. 104]

### **TOASTS and SENTIMENTS**

A Head to earn, and a heart to spend.  
All fortune's daughters but the eldest.  
Constancy in love and sincerity in friendship.  
Friendship without interest, and love without deceit.  
May the men leave roving, and the women deceit.  
Great men honest, and honest men great.  
Happy to meet, happy to part, and happy to meet again.  
Health, joy, and mutual love.  
Health of body, peace of mind, a clean shirt, and a guinea.  
To every one that you and I know.  
Independency, and a genteel sufficiency.  
May the single be marry'd, and the marry'd be happy.  
May we kiss whom we please, and please whom we kiss.  
May we always be able to resist the assaults of prosperity and adversity.  
May temptation never conquer virtue.  
May we never know sorrow but by name.  
May the evening's diversion bear the morning's reflection.  
More friends and less need of them.  
Peace and plenty.  
May the miser grow poor, and the benevolent rich.  
May our passions be slaves to us, not we to our passions.  
Short shoes and long corns to the enemies of America.  
[p. 117]

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