

THE HUMOROUS SIDE OF THE SERIOUS

BY ROBERT SPARKS WALKER

AS serious as she appears to be, Nature is sometimes very humorous. From the high flying eagle to the humble doodle-bug in the dry sheltered soil, and to the lowly ant that sneaks into the pantry, there is a touch of humor as rare and as rich as the amusing product found in the human family.

And, it is not always the animal life that monopolizes the humorous actions that cause the observer to see the amusing side. For example, an opening flower will sometimes get itself into a very ridiculous situation, and the person who has a trained eye for observing the amusing sight will see in the face of the helpless flower bud an expression that is certain to beget laughter. Almost every week during the months of July and August, I find an unfortunate bud of the wild sweet-potato which has gotten itself into a rather amusing situation.

The flower-bud of a wild sweet-potato vine measures about two inches long, is cream colored, and reminds one of a small cigar. Hungry beetles and voracious caterpillars eat holes in this vine's foliage. The wind sometimes blows one of the perforated leaves over the flower-bud. The wild sweet-potato usually opens its floral bud early in the morning before daylight. When one of its flower-buds gets its head through a hole in a leaf, it cannot open, and there it sits and grunts and groans, securely shackled throughout the day, and while its brother blossoms are spread wide open and are entertaining insect beaux, it seemingly begs for assistance. As soon as the leaf is slipped off, the bud gets a hump on itself and spreads like a person opens a parasol, provided the handicap is removed before midday.

A few years ago, I went to Wildwood, Georgia to assist in

making a motion picture of the Periodical Cicada, or Seventeen-year locust as it emerged from the ground, ascended a tree and slipped off the old skin jacket, which it had been wearing for seventeen long years without laundering or starching. A person who knows anything at all about this insect, knows that it has the habit of emerging from the ground during the night. On the evening that was set for it to come forth at Wildwood, a heavy downpour of rain that afternoon had brought Lookout Creek out of its banks. The torrents went on a wild spree and the overflow had filled the thousands of holes which had previously been dug by the cicadas. The water held them to the ground in their earthen chambers.

By morning the flood had receded. During the forenoon that wooded land was the busiest place I have visited in many years. The locusts were coming forth from the ground by tens of thousands, climbing the trees and splitting their old skins. Slowly but surely each one crawled out, leaving the old husk firmly anchored to the rough bark of the tree. It presented as humorous a spectacle as one might find at some summer resort where the outdoor crowd has been soaked in a heavy downpour of rain. It was amusing as the presentation by expert actors of Shakespeare's Twelfth Night.

In the year 1925 some parts of the South experienced one of the severest drouths ever recorded. I happened to be living in the drouth-stricken area. One Sunday, the middle of June, before the drouth reached its worst state, I visited a farmer living on the Chicamauga Creek, seven miles east of Chattanooga. We were walking through his meadow when I observed tens of thousands of weed pests known as bracted plantain which had gone to seed. There were also other weeds like wild asters, flea-banes, trumpet creeper, and swamp loosestrife, all green. I suggested that if the drouth persisted two weeks longer that he might touch a match to the meadow and destroy the bracted plantain with its hundreds of millions of seeds before they fully matured.

As we walked along, he unconsciously acted on my suggestion, removed a match from his vest pocket, struck it and dropped it into the weeds. The blaze that followed startled us completely. As green as the vegetation seemed to be, it quickly ignited. The flames spread speedily over an acre of ground, and burned rapidly in two directions. Bracted plantain and other weed pests fell as gracefully before the flames as if they were being cut with a mowing machine.

There were tens of thousands of grasshoppers feasting in that field, all ages, all sizes. When the flames disturbed their peace, they leaped into the air and struggled frantically to escape. So numerous were they that the air was almost darkened by their flight ahead of the long fire line. There was a wild stampede for a few feet in front where they took wing and fled. Up they flew by the thousands, some like old grey bearded men grasshoppers, wobbly from age, hobbling with canes! Young men grasshoppers with hats and canes in hands! Boy grasshoppers fleeing bare-footed! Flapper grasshoppers scurrying wildly in advance of the crackling fire!

Onward the population thus moved. The flames steamed and sizzled and crackled, but void of other sounds save the clattering of grasshopper wing cases. The host of tenants moved steadily onward. However, with all the wild excitement, no grasshopper citizen stirred until the blaze had advanced near enough that it could feel the heat.

By standing in direct line of the stampede, I sensed ten thousand grasshopper feet that roughened my cheek and neck as they flew wildly through the air, careless of what they were running up against. I wrinkled the skin on my nose and face a thousand times under the tickling sensation of rough unshod grasshopper feet. Like a traffic officer handling a mob of human pedestrians, I kept my arms in constant motion forcing the wild creatures away from my face. Without a single traffic policeman of their own tribe to manage the large crowd, if there were one boy or girl, or man or woman grasshopper burned, I did not learn about the tragedy. A dozen times or more, I investigated the fire-line, but no grasshopper was stupid enough to let the flames reach his body, and none was so terribly confused that it fled towards the blaze instead of away from it!

What would an equal number of human beings have done under a similar catastrophe, with a raging fire in their midst as large as this one? Of the many experiences that I have had with insect life, this is one of the most amusing that I have witnessed in many years.

In the meanwhile, this farmer's rat-terrier had treed a box turtle in a nearby pea patch. When we reached the house, we saw the dog was carrying the boxed up pedestrian in his mouth. The turtle's hard shell was slobber-soaked. Whatever the dog thought the animal was, I do not profess to know, unless he believed it to

be an animated bone of some sort, for when he reached the house, he carried it into the garden and buried it!

Back to the turtle-field the dog hurried, and succeeded in finding and in bringing in four other box turtles all of which he interred in his turtle-burying ground. It was no punishment for the box turtles, for they had simply been cast into a turtle's heaven! As soon as the dog was off guard, the turtle opened his front window, clawed out of the prison and was soon tramping lightly back home! But when the slow traveler was passing the house, the terrier lifted his ears in surprise, ran out, grabbed the hard-shelled trophy up, carried it back and re-interred it in his turtle-graveyard. This put the dog on guard, and thereafter he tried to keep a keener vigil on his burial grounds. However, despite his watchfulness, his victims were shrewd enough to slip out of the ground and make their escape.

Many animals possess human traits. Even the detested housefly and other flies are somewhat human-like in their manners. In my city, the superintendent of the construction work for a gas company, tells me that in sending men out to seek gas leaks, that he cautions them to be on the lookout for green flies, for these green complectioned aviators disclose the gas leaks by gathering about them in great numbers.

Like the human being who seeks his fill of moonshine liquor, and who sometimes gets poisoned on a swallow of wood alcohol, these green flies seek the gas leaks, and there they sit and absorb the ill smelling stuff until their bodies turn greener and greener, and sooner or later, one by one they topple over dead!

To my peach and persimmon trees there come every evening just at dusk in summertime, thousands of hard-shelled May beetles which alight on the green foliage and devour it. Just as it grows dark I can see them buzzing about in swarms between me and the sky, and when I turn on the flashlight under the branches, the light reveals here and there a beetle sitting astride the leaf-edge taking in food to last it until the following evening. When I touch one of these beetles, it turns loose and makes no attempt to fly, but drops into the grass at my feet, hiding in the herbage. Thus it preserves its life.

I sometimes wonder who first taught those beetles about the habits of the insectivorous birds,—those that are fond of snapping

up just such beetles in daytime! How do these beetles know that birds which are fond of beetles come to the peach and persimmon trees while the sun is shining? How do they know that if they themselves should also go there in daytime to feast that instead of feasting they would be feasted on, and that their race would be threatened with extinction? At any rate, it is a humorous sight to witness these beetles emerging at evening from the grass in which they have been concealed. And then they go boldly to their green dinner tables at a time they are sure that the birds have gone to roost!

It is a hot day in August that I am writing these observations and notes, and as the perspiration flows from my forehead and cheeks, and while my stomach fusses for a cool refreshment of some kind, a fidgety brown wren intensifies my thirst by alighting in front of my open window, and bobbing his stubby tail up and down, screams loudly into my ears in pure English, "*Sherbet! sherbet! sherbet!*"

A FALSE NEWSPAPER REPORT

It is not an easy matter to feel that it is just as natural for a man to perish as it is for a clump of grass to wither. Love of friends and family, love of pleasure, and a desire to accumulate property, and best of all the craving to achieve something worth while, are some of the things that make a person struggle to live.

It is a fact that we seldom heed the sad event which we call death until it concerns our immediate family. Every being, no matter how deeply he is engrossed in his personal affairs, and those of the world, at intervals, must seriously meditate on this event which is surely coming to him.

But, really, to hear that you are dead, and then to read the fact, not only in the daily newspapers, but to see the glaring tale proclaimed in a special newspaper bulletin, brings one face to face with a subject that he would rather not discuss, and it so arouses his thoughts that he must put to test some act that will prove the report false or true.

When the astounding report of my death came to me, it was during the World War when Germany was sinking every craft of the Allies that she could approach. At five o'clock in the afternoon, I was waiting for a street car one block away from the daily

newspaper office, where special bulletins were being written and displayed almost hourly.

The street car finally came, much belated, and, as usual at that hour not only every seat was occupied, but there was scarcely standing room in the aisle and on the platforms. Just as I squeezed through the crowd into the aisle, I heard a man say, "Yes, he's dead," and then I was startled to hear my name mentioned. "I was acquainted with him," declared another, and I know it is he, since he is the only man by that name who ever lived in this city," and then my name was repeated over and over.

I halted and breathed with some difficulty, as I stood there listening to the conversations and the opinions regarding my character, as is customary when a citizen has passed away. The crowd was so sure of my death that I did not dare dispute the fact at first, and since I was entirely ignorant of the source of their information, the news came as a serious shock to me, though ridiculous. I could not, however, repress a feeling that in all probability the report might be true!

Like a flash, for the moment, I really thought that which I had been listening to probably might be true, but of one thing I was certain: my ability to observe physical bodies was still undestroyed! To bring some physical test on which I might rely, I looked over the crowd, peeped out of the window, grasped hold of the leather strap over my head, examined my hands thoroughly, yanked on each of my ears, and I found I still was not robbed of the sense of touch. I took out my watch, and while everything about me seemed natural, yet there was that sensation that I was dreaming. The conversations concerning my demise continued uninterruptedly, and I was quite anxious to learn the details, but dared not make inquiry. When I had traveled a mile, I was confident that I was not literally dead, and I gave a man a weighty slap on his shoulder and said, "Here I am!" He and his companion looked me in the face through excited eyes, and one face paled. The other man was speechless. Finally, one of them said, "A special bulletin posted at the daily newspaper office declares that you lost your life with the sinking of the President Lincoln."

"Ah, that solves the mystery," I told him, "but I believe the report is untrue!" I hurried on through the crowd to the front platform. At intervals, while traveling the rest of the way home,

I had the privilege of listening to further conversations concerning my death by a number of passengers, the most of whom were rank strangers to me. But even after I had convinced myself that there was a mistake somewhere, during the next few minutes, as I listened to the grave discussions of my death, doubts came to my mind that I was really alive and in the flesh!

When I reached home, I was feeling trembly over the reports, and I immediately broke the news to my family. A half hour later, I learned from my neighbors that friends had been calling on them to ascertain if there were any truth in the report. The pastor of the church of which I was a member, had been asked concerning my welfare, and the newspaper reporters had directed their inquiries to my near relatives to avoid agitating grief or uneasiness among the immediate members of my small family.

That evening while en route to the Red Cross headquarters to help in some work, I was driven to the daily newspaper office, and was permitted to behold with my own eyes the large bulletin proclaiming my death! It was an unusual experience, and when I read the display announcement written in heavy script, there I stood shivering in my tracks like some old fool!

That was all there was to it, except for a month afterwards, I was frequently hailed on the streets by friends and acquaintances, who thoughtlessly, though quite naturally, asked many questions, some of which might have been classed as being foolish.

"Was that you who went down with the sinking of the President Lincoln?"

"Didn't you die a few weeks ago?"

"Was that a false report?"

Finding that I was not quite gone from this sphere, a few days later the newspapers reproduced the photograph of a young man who owned my full name, and who lived in a nearby suburb. It was declared that he was the person who lost his life in the sinking of the boat. However, a few weeks later, this young man escaped the briny depths as safely as I, for when the final report was made, the man who bore my full name who really lost his life was a resident of the State of New York, almost a thousand miles away! This verified report brought me back to normalcy again!