

## TALES WITH PHILOSOPHICAL MORALS.

BY PHILIP E. B. JOURDAIN.

### I. THE MODEST KING.

“FINALLY,” concluded the King, who had just been opening a Cats’ Home, “let us remember, in our search for knowledge, that there are some things which are for ever beyond the reach of human intelligence.”

The King sat down amid thunderous applause at this appropriate speech, and next day the papers were unanimous in their praise of “the philosophy, and still more the modesty, of a monarch who could make such admissions as to the limitations of the intellect of human beings, of whom he is one of the most illustrious.”

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I will pass over the rage of the King when he found that his speeches for the opening of the Cats’ Home and a Theological Congress had been interchanged, so that he addressed the Congress as follows:

“This Institution will be, not only a refuge for those forsaken by their owners, but also a place where many, I hope, will enter peacefully upon their long last rest.”

I will, I say, pass over this, because it has nothing to do with the story.

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The general chorus of admiration pleased the King and at last he began to get a little less modest. I regret to say that this was brought about chiefly by a saying of the Court Fool:

“Not only has the King surpassed us all in modesty, but he has also given evidence that he possesses a mind of quite singular power. While content, with the rest of us, to disclaim all knowledge of what

cannot be known, he shows by his very words, that he knows something about the latter, namely, that it cannot be known."

The King was so pleased that he made the Fool a little Ruler of the province of a neighboring King (who had died intestate); but, curiously enough, the Fool, when he heard of the appointment, laughed and said:

"The difference between the King and me is that he has made a King of the Fool, while I have made a....."

But the rest is *lèse majesté*.

## II. THE PHILOSOPHER'S REVENGE.

Once upon a time two philosophers (whom I will call A and B) quarreled. I quite forget what the quarrel was about, but it was very trivial compared with the dreadful revenge taken by A.

First of all, B, deeply insulted, tried to express his contempt for A by sending him *Emerson's Essays*. A retaliated with some plays by Mr. G. Bernard Shaw. Then both lost their tempers, and bad English was bandied about in the shape of works by Miss Marie Corelli. Then A struck the final blow.

One dark, windy night A crept up to B's house and put a bit of cardboard into B's letter-box. On it were some sentences which A had cunningly contrived to give acute pain to the philosophic mind.

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The next morning B found the card, and read:

*The statement on the other side of this card is false.*

"Well, suppose that is true," thought B. He turned over the card and read:

*The statement on the other side of this card is false.*

"This is false, then, so the statement on the other side is true. That confirms my hypothesis!" So he borrowed a pencil in a gold case (which he forgot to return) from a neighbor, and marked the first side he had looked at "true." Then he went into breakfast quite happily, and showed the card with a chuckle, to his wife.

"Why have you written 'true' on this side?" asked she; "the other side says it is false."

"Why, don't you see, it is true because the statement on the other side is false."

"Stuff," replied she, "there is no reason why it shouldn't be false and the statement on the other side true!"

As sometimes happens with women, her wild, unpremeditated

shot hit the mark. So poor B had no retort ready, and had to content himself with grumbling at the hardboiledness of his egg (which was, as every housewife knows, just right.)

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In the course of the morning B had an inspiration. "Every woman," said he, repeating one of those silly generalities about women indulged in by people like Max O'Rell or Dr. Emil Reich, "assumes that a statement is false unless it proves to be true,—and then, if a true woman, she still thinks it false." So he wrote on another card:

*The statement on the other side of this card is true.*

"She will think this false, so that when she turns it over and reads

*The statement on the other side of this card is false,* she will have to think the first statement *true*. Won't that puzzle her! Perhaps she will toast me a muffin for tea," he added with true insight.

\* \* \*

At the luncheon table B's wife glanced at the card, sniffed: "True, is it?" and turned over the card.

"I *knew* it was false," added she then. "Do you mean to say *that's* what you have been doing all the morning?"

"No," said he untruthfully, "I....."

"You had much better have been mowing the lawn," replied she.

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So, as a result of A's wicked deed, B not only got no muffin for tea, but, ever afterwards, his wife held him and his logic in even greater contempt than she had before.

But the lesson was not wholly wasted. B gradually came to perceive the great truth that falsehood, in logic as in other things, though a good servant, is a bad master.

### III. A KING'S INFLUENCE.

This particular King was pompous, rude and stupid, and, one day, he actually said to one of his Nobles, who, he thought, could do him no harm:

"You are *absolutely* incapable of telling the truth!"

It must be confessed that the King had some grounds for this statement, for the Noble in question had never told the truth yet,

but was: "Be all things to all men." This, the tutor pointed out with wearisome frequency, should be carefully observed by the Monarch who wishes to avoid making enemies.

The Prince was so conscientious that he determined to begin at once to be all things to all men; of course he would have to do the things one by one, for one can't be two things at once (it is a mistake to think that one can blow both hot and cold at the same time).

So, next day, the Prince began by being friendly to every one.

The next day the Prince saw that he must hurry up if he wanted to be *all* things in a lifetime, and, since the next most obvious thing to being friendly was being unfriendly, he was unfriendly to every one.

The next day he took the next most obvious step, and was first friendly and then unfriendly.

The next day he was first friendly, then unfriendly, and then friendly again.

And so on.

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At last his changes of temper got so rapid that he began to be very much disliked, and his tutor shook his head (his *own* head, by the way) and said: "Alas, now, if he had only followed my precept!"

And he *had*, hadn't he?

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I am at a loss to know whether the moral is: Not to pay attention to maxims; or not to be conscientious; or not to do what people tell you; or what; so I cannot do better than conclude with the poet's words:

"I wish that I were wise  
Enough to moralize!—  
But I forgot  
That you do not."

#### V. THE SEARCH FOR THE ABSOLUTE.

[This story of Mr. Jourdain's recalls one of Schiller's Xenions which reads as follows (see *Goethe and Schiller's Xenions*, p. 150):

"Do you take truth for an onion whose layers you singly can peel off?  
Never on truth can you draw save you deposit it first."—p. c.]

There was once a man who spent his time about equally between his study and his bed. But he was not wholly devoted to sleep and

literature: once he was known to enjoy a meal. That was when he had Irish Stew for dinner. The peculiar flavor of the onions was so pleasing and new; and he began to meditate. . . .

He bought a raw onion, and it gave him a feeling of disappointment. It had a light brown cover and smelled earthy. "Nevertheless," said he, "inside this casing there is the Absolute Onion; it *must* be there somewhere; the casing is unessential." So he peeled it off.

The inside was pale green and had a penetrating smell not nearly so nice as the smell of the onion in the Irish Stew. Still there was something alike in the smells, and this encouraged the philosopher. Then he made a discovery; *that* was a shell unessential to the Absolute Onion, and off it came.

Soon afterwards he made another discovery. There was a new shell under that. And so on.

As time went on, the philosopher's disappointment grew. So much was unessential, and each coat was so like the last. Tears sprang to his eyes: he thought they were tears of disappointment, but—well, have you ever peeled an onion yourself?

Still he persevered, and when he had shelled off all that was unessential, he found—nothing at all.