

**THE SPEAKER'S
HANDBOOK
OF
HUMOR**

*How to Tell, Select and Create
Funny Stories for Every Occasion
Plus More than 1,500 of the
Author's Favorite Stories*

*Harper & Brothers,
Publishers,
New York
1956*

MAXWELL DROKE

3

CHAPTER

HOW TO TELL

A FUNNY STORY

The idea that one must *learn* to tell a story will strike some persons as preposterous. You, I trust, are not of that company. I assume that you have paid for this book, which bears a title that can hardly be described as obscure. Admittedly, that assumption may be somewhat wide of the mark. You may have discovered this treasure under the Christmas tree; it may have come to you in plain wrapper, from a benefactor unknown. In either of these latter circumstances, it just could be that someone has a conviction your storytelling technique can stand improvement. You might give this a passing thought. Or, better yet, don't let the thought pass; wrestle with it for a spell.

Storytelling is an art. And none of the arts is a gratis gift of the gods. There are no born artisans. There are only pupils with an inherent desire to master the mores.

The art of storytelling will advance your social and business status more surely, and more swiftly, than almost any other accomplishment. And one of the nicest things about storytelling: it's such a delightfully *portable* art! You can't show off trained seals without quite a bit of bother. If you are a violinist, you have to lug the fiddle around—and then there's always the chance they will

forget to ask you to play. If you sing, you must find an accompanist, and a few people who will stay put and listen.

But the storyteller is *ready*. At the drop of a hint—or the drop of a gavel—he goes into his performance. Nobody stops him—and nobody *wants* to stop him if he is any good at his business—and if he exercises reasonable discretion.

I knew a man once who didn't. He was running for office. Whenever he saw a little group of people assembled he would saunter over, start telling stories, and presently get in his political pitch. Worked pretty well most of the time. But one particular group didn't warm up at all. "What's the matter with you folks?" the politician asked plaintively. "You act like you were at a funeral."

"Brother," said a spokesman severely, "this is a funeral!"

THE STORY AS A LUBRICANT FOR LOGIC

If you can tell a story—and have a story to tell—you are in business anywhere, at any time. And the right story is such a wonderful lubricant for logic! People remember your point—and are more disposed to move in your direction—when that point is supported by a story. Recollect Abraham Lincoln!

Or consider Cotton Mather. Hardly the *bon vivant* of Boston, the pattern of a Puritan playboy. Clergyman, author, scholar, he graduated from Harvard at the age of fifteen, devoted much of his life to learning. It was largely through his powers of persuasion that inoculation against smallpox was introduced into Massachusetts. And he knew well the power of a sound illustration. "If you have laid up an inexhaustible store of stories," he once said, "and have a skill in telling them handsomely, you may not only ingratiate yourself wherever you make your appearance, but also obtain almost any request that you shall make one of them a witty introduction to."

This quotation illustrates our point that the art of storytelling has its practical values. The persuasive power of the anecdote is too often underestimated. Have you ever known a really good storyteller who wasn't getting along all right? The popular salesmen, educators, clergymen and executives are likely to be above-average storytellers. These men are not clowns or comedians. They make no pretense of purveying the latest wisecrack. But they know the value of a good story. Their illustrations are diligently sought, and they consider it not beneath their dignity to labor at the tale-teller's trade.

YOU CAN LEARN TO TELL A STORY!

Telling stories is an accomplishment. And accomplishments can be acquired. You can learn to tell a story very much as you learn to drive a nail, drive a car, or drive a bargain. I shall set down for you in the next few pages a few fundamentals—the basic principles that will make you a far better narrator than you now are. After that, it's largely a matter of practice.

Yes, you *can* learn to tell a story. And to support my assertion, let me tell *you* a story:

In a Midwestern city there dwells an influential banker who, for something like half a century confined his public talk to board meetings and employee groups. No one had ever heard him tell a story, or suspected that he had the slightest inclination to do so. But after a lifetime of sitting silently at the speaker's table on occasions great and small, this banker experienced an overwhelming desire to participate more actively in the goings-on. He wanted to be an after-dinner speaker. And he had the courage that so many in his position lack. For he began at once accepting invitations to "say a few words." And he started right off telling stories.

Simple candor forces me to admit that his exhibition was as inept as any I have ever encountered. His anecdotes were terrible—picked at random without point or purpose. And he told them in a dry, crackling monotone, without the slightest emphasis or characterization.

But he got a big hand. To some, the spectacle of a staid banker thus unbending was amusing. They laughed, not at the jokes, but at the humorous situation. Others felt that anything a Great Man said deserved approbation—and gave it without stint. Then, as you might expect, there were the "policy" laughers. In every group there was sure to be a claque that owed the banker money. They could be counted on to make the rafters ring.

To our friend the banker, the kudos was as heady wine. He enjoyed greatly his new prestige, and with uncommon acumen set to work to improve his performance. He sought the counsel of his bright young men, listened attentively to their criticisms, had them seek out new and livelier material. As a result, his speeches grew better and better. The last time I was privileged to hear the gentleman he spoke in a strange city, to a group that "knew not Joseph." I won't say that that he was precisely a Chautauqua attraction, but he acquitted himself most creditably.

I tell you this story because it so well illustrates the mental atti-

tude that is essential to success in any endeavor. First and foremost, you must think that storytelling is pretty important. You must *want* to be right good at it. You must be willing to trade a little of your time and thought in return for the knack of narration.

This is not too much to ask. It is an obligation that every art, craft and skill imposes upon the acolyte. If you dislike bridge and play only because your spouse nags you into it, Blackwood and Goren as combined counsel can't lift you out of the mire of mediocrity. If whacking a little ball into an assortment of imbedded tomato cans strikes you as a pointless pastime, you just weren't cut out for a golfer; ten years hence you'll still be the club dub.

You must bring to an art some measure of respect and affection, or it will not be wooed and won. *Funny stories should be told only by those persons who enjoy telling them.* If you look upon the telling of tales as an ordeal; if you dread the task of "hunting up some good ones" to enliven your discourse; if you feel foolish and uncomfortable in relating humorous incidents, then the funny story is not your meat or métier. Leave funny stories alone—severely alone. There are few spectacles more heart-rending than that of a person telling a funny story because he feels it is expected of him. His every action is a dead giveaway. As clearly as though he spoke the words, he is saying to his audience: "I don't *want* to tell this story. I don't think it is so very funny anyhow. And, besides, I feel that it is beneath my dignity to stoop to this sort of thing. But my notes say, 'At this point tell story of two Irishmen,' so here goes."

Stories told in this manner are worse than wasted. They cause the audience to feel ill at ease, and perhaps a little sorry for the suffering narrator. So, instead of adding to the effectiveness of a speech, the unfruitful period becomes a negative factor.

I cannot too strongly emphasize that funny stories are funny only when the narrator enters wholeheartedly into the spirit and tells them with a certain joyous abandon. It is of the utmost importance that you shall enjoy yourself in your role of raconteur. Unless *you* have a good time, your audience is likely to be pretty well bored.

If you cannot bring yourself to enjoy storytelling—if you get no kick out of inciting others to gay laughter—then I can do little for you. You may as well lay this book aside and forget the whole matter. You may acquire a ton of technique and all of the tricks in the bag. But you will still be a flop. Storytelling isn't for you. Too bad, but we all have our limitations. I'm completely tone-deaf, and through two wars I never learned to keep step. The only good thing

that has ever been said of my dancing: I'm light on my partner's feet!

The person who vastly relishes his role as a mime may have a great deal to learn. But he has a foundation on which to build. If you get a sort of tingling thrill out of hearing a really good story—and a desire to tell it better than it was told to you—then you are of our clan. We can do business together.

HOW TO "SLIP INTO A STORY"

And how do we begin? We begin at the beginning. In an earlier section I have discussed the selection of material. So I'll presume that you have your story. It is a story carefully selected to support a certain point in your speech. But how do you propose to introduce it? This is most important.

You may have a little trouble at first launching your stories with just the right casual touch. This deserves a good deal of thought and study. Much depends upon it.

Right at the outset I ask you to make a *verboten* list. Spurn definitely, absolutely and completely such outworn artifices as "That reminds me of a story . . ." "It seems there were two Irishmen . . ." or "I heard a good one the other day."

Matter of fact it is much better if you don't announce to your audience that you are going to tell a story—professionals rarely make such an announcement. When you have an opportunity, observe how smoothly they glide into a narrative. Try to avoid use of the word "story." And above all, refrain from labeling your offering as "funny." Let people discover the humor for themselves. If it is worth a laugh you'll get it. And humor is always emphasized by the element of surprise.

Drift into your story as quietly and unostentatiously as you can. Be well under way with it before listeners realize that you are relating an anecdote. Often you will give your story a more authentic ring if you can tie it to some individual out of your own experience, or some character that you may invent. Instead of, "Well, the way I heard this story, there was an old soak . . ." lead up to the point with more subtlety. Let's say you are discussing dependability, and by contrast you want to bring in the story of the old soak. Try this: "Some men are just naturally born dependable. Others are—well, they're a good deal like Hob Jenkins, who used to do odd jobs around the little town where I was raised. Hob was a regular old soak." From this point you will proceed with the tale. Observe that there is no announcement, no intimation of a forthcoming story.

You just fit it into the pattern, like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Don't be disturbed or depressed if at the outset you find this procedure difficult. Your glide may not be too smooth, but at least you have an objective—you know how you *want* to do it.

NEVER BE HECTOR, THE HERO

Never tell a story in which you play the role of "hero"; in which you display bravery or any other admirable quality; in which you outsmart the other fellow or get the best of a bargain. This is the one thing an audience will neither forgive nor forget. If fortune smiles upon you in a self-related anecdote, let it appear as a stroke of "dumb luck," in spite of your obvious ineptitude, rather than as a result of uncommon acumen.

I could go into a lengthy discussion of the psychology back of this counsel, but it should hardly be necessary. We all dislike the "wise guy" and want no part of his palaver. But, conversely, audiences everywhere take huge delight in a story the speaker tells on himself. E. B. White once observed that although we all have troubles, the humorist is unique in that he fattens on trouble. He makes trouble pay. Humorists struggle along with a good will and endure tribulations cheerfully, knowing how well it will serve them in the sweet by-and-by. So, tell about your troubles—those brought on by your stupidity, ignorance, or smart-aleck insouciance. If you have an experience that makes you out as a sap—one that displays your lack of courage or initiative—forget your dignity and wade right in. The group will like you all the more for your honest confession.

For many years I have had fun at sales conventions telling of my first experience as a salesman. I was working for a lumber company at the time. The old man called me in his office one day and announced, for reasons that remain inexplicable, that he was going to send me on the road.

He gave me a pad of daily report forms and an expense-account record—told me to keep one up and the other down—and sent me out with a warm handclasp and a cold prospect list. All the way over to Knoxville, Tennessee, where I was to make my first call, I kept practicing the stock speech I had prepared. When I got there I took my courage and a streetcar and went up to the office building where my prospect was hibernating. I walked boldly up to the building entrance—and right past it. I wasn't exactly nervous—I was just plain scared to death.

Well, the essence of the story is that when I finally got into see my man, I couldn't think of a thing to say; just stood there looking

even dumber than you would imagine. Finally I told the prospect that he was the first man I'd ever tried to sell; that I had forgotten my speech, and the whole sad story. He laughed, I recollect, most of the time he was writing out an order; said I was the most refreshing thing he'd seen in the drummer line all that year, and he begged me not to let the curse of sordid commercialism rest upon me until I had made at least one more round.

Why do people warm up to the speaker who frankly and resolutely spreads his foibles before them? One reason is that they so often see themselves mirrored in the weaknesses, frustrations and follies placed on public parade. It gives them a comfortable feeling to know that another fellow human being has been weighed and found wanting.

Of course they are not *quite* so dumb as the fellow who has just given public testimony. In a similar set of circumstances they would have acquitted themselves more creditably than he. This knowledge enhances their self-esteem; gives them a sense of confidence and superiority—and that, too, is all to the good.

Ministering to the individual ego is always a step in the right direction. Never overlook an opportunity to build up the customers; they like it, and they can use it. My mother, who was a Lyceum and Chautauqua artist, once ran into the late William Allen White on a lecture tour, and remarked that he must be getting a great deal of praise for a newly published novel. "Well," reflected the honest Kansan, "not a damned bit more than I need."

The self-centered interest of the individual is something we should more often take into account. You, my friend, are the most interesting human being in the world—next to myself, of course. You are all wrapped up in your plans and projects; your family; your business; your possessions—and your prejudices. We seek, in a civilized social order, to subdue and camouflage this trait. But it is inherent in us all. It explains a great many of the things at which we laugh:

A fond father took his young daughter to the zoo. It was her first visit, and she was enjoying every moment of it. But at the gorilla cage, the little girl expressed her first trepidation.

"What would happen, Daddy, if the gorilla got loose?"

In a gesture of reassurance, the father told his little daughter not to worry. "I would protect you," he said.

The child thought this over for a few moments, and then spoke again: "But, Daddy, just in case the gorilla eats you up, what bus do I take home?"

We laugh at the naive self-interest of a little child because it

sparks a kindred feeling deep in our innermost being. Every man, though he may deny the allegation, asks eternally, "What bus shall I take home?"

THE RULE OF THREE

I shall now set down three anecdotes. I think they are pretty good stories. My reason for presenting them here and now is that they share an interesting and highly useful device. We shall have more to say of that later. But now, let us turn to the stories:

This business of "wise-guying" is a rather precarious one (says Roy W. Howard, of the Scripps-Howard Newspapers). It brings to mind the case of the Jewish lad—the Jewish lad who applied for a job at the Vatican. The lad was not exactly encouraged; in fact, they spoke almost harshly to him. They told him they couldn't consider his application—couldn't consider the application of anyone who wasn't a Catholic.

In a couple of months the boy returned. "It's all right now," he said, "I've been confined."

So they gave the boy a job. His duties were to knock each morning on the Pope's door, announce the hour and the condition of the weather.

On the first morning, the little Jewish boy: "Good morning. Your Holiness. It's seex o'clock of a bright, sunshiny morning."

The Pope, as was his custom, responded: "The Lord knows, and I know."

The second morning the performance was repeated.

Again on the third morning, the little Jewish boy: "Good morning. Your Holiness. It's seex o'clock of a bright, sunshiny morning."

The Pope responded: "The Lord knows, and I know."
"And a couple of wise guys you are," piped the Jewish lad. "It's nine o'clock, and rainin' like hell!"

During the course of World War II a young naval lieutenant, on a brief furlough, sauntered into an exclusive club in Pittsburgh, where he had been given a guest card. In midafternoon the lounge was deserted, except for a middle-aged gentleman dozing in a chair by a window. Desperate for companionship, the young lieutenant approached the dozing member.

"Sir," he said, "would you perhaps care to join me in a little handball practice in the gym?"

"Never play," snapped the member. "Tried it once years ago; didn't like it."

The lieutenant thanked the member and walked away to idly inspect a collection of trophies. Soon he returned.

"Perhaps, sir," he said, "you might care for a plunge in the pool?"

"Don't swim," replied the member. "Tried it once; didn't like it."

An hour passed with no further sign of life in the lounge. Desperately, the lieutenant made a third approach. "Sir," he said, "I must

apologize for this intrusion, but my leave is short. I am a stranger here and I would like to find something to do. Could we—could we perhaps—have a game of billiards?"

"My boy," said the member in obvious concern, "I am sorry, really sorry, but I don't play billiards. I did try the game once, years ago, but I didn't care for it. But I have a suggestion: My son will be dropping in at five o'clock. I am sure he will be glad to play with you."

"Thank you, sir," said the grateful lieutenant. Then he added significantly: "An only child, I presume?"

The train was crowded and a veteran, just in from Korea, walked down the aisle looking for a seat. Finally he paused beside a woman whose small dog was occupying a seat.

"Madam," he asked, "would you mind holding that dog on your lap? I'd like to sit down."

"I'll do no such thing," flared the passenger. "I paid a full fare for this dog. You'll have to find another seat."

The GI walked away. Presently he returned. "Madam," he said, "there are no other seats. If you'll let me sit here, I'll hold the dog."

"No," said the woman decisively. "Fifi is entitled to a seat; you'll have to find some other place."

The soldier turned away, limping perceptibly. But he was soon back with a new proposal: "Look, lady, this is my final offer: I'm very tired and my wounded leg is giving me fits. I've got to sit down. I'll rent a pillow for Fifi. She can sit right here on my lap."

"Now, look here, young man," the woman snapped, "you've annoyed me quite long enough. I have told you twice Fifi stays where she is. Please don't bother me again, or I'll call the conductor!"

"Okay," said the GI, "if that's your attitude." With a quick gesture he reached down, picked up the pint-sized Pomeranian and threw her through an open window.

Several passengers who had observed the proceedings noted this climax with obvious satisfaction, but an Englishman directly across the aisle seemed quite perturbed.

"Oh, you Americans!" he complained to his seat mate. "You do everything the wrong way."

"How so?" asked the interested salesman from Omaha.

"Well," continued the Englishman, "you drive on the wrong side of the road. You employ your cutlery in quite the wrong way. And now look at that soldier there—he has thrown out the wrong bitch!"

And now let us consider that device of which we spoke a few moments ago. You will observe in studying the stories just related that the Jewish lad knocked *three* times at the door of the Pope; the lonely naval officer made *three* pilgrimages to the old codger in the club chair and the Englishman cited *three* instances of American "wrongness."

All this is not mere happenstance. Here are illustrated applications

of the Rule of Three, perhaps the most important single principle in the construction of humorous situations. You will observe it recurring again and again in stories that have a sound dramatic base.

Why *three*? The answer, on reflection, is quite obvious. First, we set our pattern; second, we confirm it by repetition. And then, when you have the routine firmly in mind—when you have learned what to expect—we present you with the *unexpected*.

Had we made our point the *first* time, our story would be lacking in contrast; had we made it the *second* time, the story would have sacrificed much of the suspense we were so carefully building. But the *third* time is just right. Curiosity is at its peak. Nothing can be gained, and something surely will be lost by stringing the story out to five or six chapters, as many an amateur will be tempted to do.

Look for the Rule of Three in the stories that intrigue you. Apply it in the stories that you yourself construct. Every seasoned tale-teller uses this rule, although some may not be conscious of the principle at work.

DON'T "CROWD YOUR LAUGHS"

I direct your especial attention to the final sentence of the last quoted story: "... and now that soldier has thrown out the wrong bitch." An inexperienced person, relating this anecdote, would be likely to conclude it: "... and now that soldier has thrown the wrong bitch out of the window." Would this make any material difference in the effectiveness of the story?

Yes, it makes a great deal of difference. In this instance the word "bitch" is the foundation of the narrative; everything rests upon it. When you come to that word your straight narrative suddenly becomes hilarious. It is the key to laughter.

In such a situation, construct your story so that it concludes abruptly with the climactic word. Let nothing follow it—nary a syllable of sound. There is an excellent reason for this studied construction. Words or phrases appended to a climax tend to delay or impede laughter. And that is a high crime in humorous narration. Your procedure should be to tell your story, right up to the strategic point—then step back and wait for the explosion.

One of the common failings of the amateur is that he "steps on his laughs." That is, he continues talking at a point where laughter might normally be expected, and thus discourages any manifestation of merriment. It is much easier to discourage laughter than you might surmise. And, conversely, laughter may be artfully courted through devices well known to the experienced narrator.

Let us turn back for a moment to the story of the boy who knocked each morning on the Pope's door. This is one of those fantastic concoctions that demand considerable skill in the telling. Note closely our wording at the outset of the tale: "It brings to mind the case [not "story" mind you, but "case"; we aren't ready yet to reveal that we are telling a story] of the Jewish lad—the Jewish lad who applied for a job at the Vatican." Observe the repetition. This is intentional. It gives added weight to a key point. The boy is Jewish; we get that clearly in mind. Then, too, the interruption provides a breathing spot, so that the first essential point of the story may be made with one sharp, smart thrust.

Following the word "Vatican" the experienced tale-teller will pause and "wait for a laugh." This is one of those situations that may be characterized as reflective. When you stop to think of it, the picture of a Jewish boy applying for a job at the Vatican is amusing. Well, the speaker does the stopping—you do the thinking—the laugh comes as a natural consequence. This is an example I use frequently in talking to students on the subject of humorous narration. I have someone who is unfamiliar with the story read it to the class. Usually the reader will glide swiftly over this passage—and there is no laugh. This is one of the prime points that sets the professional apart. His sense of timing becomes instinctive. He scents a hidden laugh as an experienced navigator detects sand bars in a treacherous stream.

You must have good material with which to work. But what you do with what you have is also of great importance. The veteran gets laughs because he knows how to bid for them. To a far greater degree than we realize, laughter spawns laughter. The speaker pauses expectantly. A few alert individuals laugh—this is their cue and you can count on their co-operation; others join in the chorus. Those who are a bit slower in their reactions now "get the point" or have it whispered to them. These are the real howlers. He who laughs last laughs loudest. Finally the speaker has a rousing ovation. With less skillful handling, the demonstration might never have risen to audible proportions.

The amateur thinks only of getting a laugh at the conclusion of his story. The professional, especially in telling a character story, seeks laughs from comic situations all along the route. You might think that these sideline excursions would subtract from the final effect. But it doesn't work out that way. By the time your story is completed, listeners are stimulated and ready for the hearty haw-haw.

Obviously this procedure does not apply to the "straight" story, where the humor lies in concealing humor until the final impact. You must adapt your technique to the material in hand. On the whole, the story with numerous "side laughs" works best when you are delivering what is essentially a humorous talk; where you are expected to be funny "all the time."

Before we leave this subject of engineered laughter, a final admonition: You remember I have said all along that you must enjoy telling your story. You are expected to get fun out of it. But if you please, do not laugh at your own sallies. Laughing at your own jokes is a challenge to your listener. He is vaguely or actively annoyed. "The thing just can't be that funny," he concludes. And to prove his point, he holds back some measure of approbation.

In telling most types of stories you will find that if you can contribute what is known professionally as a "dead pan" expression, the effect will be heightened. Your serious expression contrasts with the funny lines. The contrast invokes even heartier laughter.

The narrator should never "get in the way" of his story. That is why it is fatal to "appreciate" your yarn unduly. Laughter is the province of the listener. As the tale-teller you become merely a mechanism to invoke merriment. So, no encores, NO encores! How often you have heard someone tell a story, get his applause (in which he joins heartily), then go back and, between fits of laughter, repeat the point two or three times. This becomes pretty boring to your audience. And it marks you unmistakably as a slovenly and unskilled teller of tales.

BEWARE OF "PRINTED-PAGE POISON"

There is a technique for writing. And quite a different technique for narration. That is why the stories you find in print must nearly always be rearranged for delivery. The writer, deprived of inflection and gesture, is compelled to clutter his script with detailed description. But the speaker has no such limitations. He should weed out the hampering "he says," "she replied" and kindred encumbrances. These I term "printed-page poison." Instead of saying, "The child exclaimed excitedly," put the excitement into your voice as you speak the words. Don't say, "At this point the judge cleared his throat impressively and remarked . . ." Impersonate the judge. Clear your throat impressively and begin at once to speak the words attributed to the judge. You will find that the context of the story, plus a slight change in the tone of your voice, will make the transition entirely clear.

And here's a neat little trick that will come in handy: When you are relating straight dialogue, as between two men we'll call Ed and Joe, who have no distinguishing characteristics, it will help materially if you turn your head rather to one side while speaking Ed's lines. When the time comes for Joe to do the talking, turn your head in the opposite direction. Simple, isn't it? And it works! The audience instinctively associates an eastward glance with Ed, a westward one with Joe. This is a bit of psychology employed by all ventriloquists. Watch one of these chaps closely the next time you have an opportunity. See how completely his illusions depend upon the skill with which he manipulates the dummy's head. Learn to use your head for something more than a sound box.

As you scan stories in magazines and books, keep a sharp lookout for such banalities as "Oh, yes, indeed," was the prompt rejoinder" or "Certainly, sir," was the surprising response." This is the old writing technique. These telltale traces of "printed-page poison" must come out. If you try to work them into your narrative, the story will have the bright spontaneity of a slightly moist fuse.

A few paragraphs back I cautioned you to end your story abruptly with the climactic word. Let there be nothing thereafter to intrude upon the outburst of laughter. This caution is especially apropos in the case of "lifted" anecdotes.

Many good writers—including some top-flight professionals—are grossly ignorant, or inexcusably careless in their organization of anecdotal material. Their printed stories will require a good deal of work, notably in the dramatic concluding paragraph.

And then there is the writer who "embroiders." A simple little story will be embellished with all manner of philosophical rosebuds and moral bow knots. When the story is told—the point made—a writer of this type will habitually tack on a fancy fringe. Something like this: "After this experience, Uncle Joe signed a pledge, and was never again known to take a drink," or "We all laughed heartily at Jake's discomfiture, and he rather sheepishly joined in the chorus."

These postscripts are anecdotal arsenic. They are bad enough on the printed page; wholly impossible in narration. If you append these observations to your climax, you smother laughter. If you go back and tack them on after the audience has had its laugh, they are stale and unprofitable.

Accept this as an axiom: When you are through with a story, you are through with it. It has served its purpose. Drop it and go on with your discourse.

LEARN YOUR STORY!

We come now to a final admonition: Learn your story. Yes, learn your story. The counsel should be superfluous. I would that it were. But we have all seen too many instances of speakers floundering through stories that they have inadequately rehearsed. In a discourse, if you forget precisely what you had intended to say at a given point you can improvise, interpolate a kindred thought, and keep right on. No one will know the difference. But with an anecdote your situation is a little different. You can so easily omit a key point, or inadvertently reveal the climax prematurely. And a funny story that doesn't quite come off is a pretty sad spectacle.

I am not going to lay down any hard-and-fast rule for you to adopt. You will know the method that works best for you. Follow it. My procedure I learned at an early age from Billy Sunday, the evangelist. As a young newspaperman I covered Billy's revival meetings; worked closely with him. Billy was a superb showman. Every word and gesture was meticulously planned and adequately rehearsed. Sunday knew precisely what he was going to say—what he was going to do—every moment of the time he was before an audience. He left nothing to chance. He worked to produce the spontaneous, informal, impromptu effect. He was perhaps the father of the precooked ad lib.

Will Rogers worked in much the same way. I chanced to be in several different cities at the time Will was appearing on a lecture tour. It was fun to watch his act at receptions tendered by civic leaders. Again and again he would work the conversation around to a point where he could throw out a few tested quips. "What kind o' city government you got here?" Will would ask. Some Prominent Citizen would begin a detailed explanation. "Yeah, I see." Will would break in, "the old grab-and-graft system, eh?" Then he would move on to another group, always planting questions that would lead to quips. "That Will Rogers!" citizens exclaimed. "He's funny all the time!"

But that is a practical impossibility. No humorist is funny all the time. And none can guarantee to be funny on order, unless the order is placed well in advance. Yet humor is expected and even demanded of the public character with an established reputation for "funny business." Thus planned procedure is an absolute necessity for the professional. And it soon becomes rather important for the amateur. As you establish a local reputation for "telling good ones"

and telling them well, you will find it advisable to be prepared for emergencies.

Now and again, as you have listened to an uncommonly able storyteller, you may have said, "I'd give *anything* if I could tell 'em the way he does!"

If you mean it—if you *really* mean it—then you must be ready to give the one thing that makes the master in any art—*time*. We have now covered the fundamentals of our art—you have the essential knowledge you will need. The next step is to put these principles into practice. With reasonable application a lifetime should be approximately long enough to get your technique moderately well under control. I purposely refrained from saying "perfect your technique" because I know of no narrator who has yet attained a state of perfection. We are all working all the time. And few laymen have any conception of the work that is required.

Regardless of the source from which a story comes to me, my first step is to write it out in my individual style. After study and reflection there may be a number of minor changes—correcting awkward construction, rearranging dialogue, a further sharpening of the point and so on. Flaws are often detected as you recite the story aloud in a "practice run."

As a final step, I memorize the story—every word and gesture. This practice has come in for some criticism. Opponents will object that it makes for a stiff and stilted style. That is true only if you permit a stiff and stilted recital. Every actor memorizes his lines and movements. It is his artistry that leads you to forget this fact.

Some excellent storytellers insist heatedly that they do not memorize. Usually this is a self-imposed delusion. They may not consciously go through the mnemonic process, but they have "worked the story over" in their minds so often that the telling has become automatic. For all practical purposes they "know the lines by heart."

Regardless of the procedure you elect to follow, you should wind up knowing your story in precise detail; the exact order in which you introduce your characters, develop your plot and progress to your climax. Unless you do this through study and application there is the grave danger that you will trip yourself up. You have seen it happen to others. And it *can* happen to you, if you are not adequately prepared.

I never tell a story, even to a small, informal group, until I have "put it through the mill." Yes, I agree there often is a great temptation. You hear a good story in the locker room at the club on Satur-

day afternoon. At a bridge party that evening you feel an urge to repeat the story. Better not do it—if you value your reputation. Let the story "set" and "season." Wait until you have had a chance to work on it; to improve the characterization; to interpolate humorous asides. Oh, yes, I'll grant you may recall the essentials of the story; you may even be able to tell it very creditably. But a really good story deserves better treatment than that—from you. Let other fellows get off the "casuals." There will be a Saturday night next week, and the week after—plenty of occasions when you, as a master, primed and prepared, may justly seek the spotlight.

And in the meantime—*learn your story!*