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Kin Hubbard

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"You ought to join the Colonial Bridge Club," said Mrs. Leghorn Tharp, when Tell Binkley complained that the newspapers wuzn' printin' any jokes about a certain little car that's on the market. "I heard a shot an' a scream in the hall, but I wuz just listenin' to Amos an' Andy an' thought no more of it," testified Mrs. Tilford Moots's brother, questioned in regard to the murder of his wife.

With these words the earthly existence of Abe Martin and his troop of Brown County neighbors, friends, and relatives, many of whom lived at a distance from the scenes of their native haunts, came to an end. More than a quarter of a century had elapsed since Abe, with his head full of homely wisdom and his trousers tucked in his high-topped boots, had sprung full-grown from the fertile brain of his creator. During this time, many had doubtless come to regard him as a permanent feature of the universe, had smiled and chuckled and at times laughed uproariously as they saw life reflected in the quaint sayings and subtle observations of the Brown County philosopher.

Frank McKinney (Kin) Hubbard, the creator of Abe Martin, was born in Bellefontaine, Ohio, in 1868. He came of a family of newspaper men (and women), his father Thomas Hubbard, being the owner and publisher of the Bellefontaine *Examiner*. This is a weekly journal which has belonged to the Hubbard family since 1830, and is now published by a brother and sister of the late humorist. Receiving a public school edu-

cation in his native town, young Hubbard found employment in his father's newspaper office, and became, as he himself says, a fair printer.¹ Later, when his father was appointed postmaster in the first Cleveland Administration, he took his station at the general delivery window, and remained at this employment for five years with such respites from a not too arduous task as would enable him to satisfy an occasional wanderlust or to exercise a talent for amateur acting, a form of entertainment of which he was inordinately fond.

While more or less regularly employed in this way, he missed no opportunity, we may be sure, to meet and observe people at close range, and to become familiar with human eccentricities, a knowledge of which formed the basis of his humor. His drawing, too, was not wholly neglected. For this form of expression he had a natural talent which he first used with telling effect in the campaign of 1884. His artistic ability was, however, uncultivated, and it was for this purpose that he entered the Jefferson Art School in Detroit.

It is the old story. The desire to become an artist was present, but perseverance and the steady grind necessary for the mastery of an elaborate technique were conspicuously absent. "I attended three forenoons and became discouraged. It was too tame," Kin explains, when referring to his experience at the art school. He did not return home at once, however. "I bought a nifty suit of clothes," he relates, "a loud plaid cape overcoat, a close reefed brown derby, and a massive buckhorn cane (I already had a large diamond brooch of shallow straw-colored stones) and I remained in Detroit some months stalling around and dividing my time with an English artist named Hugh Capper, on the *Detroit Journal*, and the theaters. My hair was dark and long and unmanageable, and if I had been ten years older I would have readily passed for an actor of rare ability." And "that was the idea," he informs us.

Returning to his home in the spring (why, we may imagine) our would-be actor resumed his position at the general delivery window, and sought recreation and diversion in amateur theatricals which won for him no inconsiderable reputation as a black-face comedian. A letter written to a friend in

¹ The facts for the brief biographical sketch here presented have, unless otherwise indicated, been taken from the short autobiography printed in the *Indianapolis News*, January 26, 1930.

Indianapolis, describing one of these amateur engagements, and embellished with water-color sketches, secured for him a position on the Indianapolis *News*. Referring to his qualifications for even this modest position, he says: "I was as well qualified for a place on the editorial staff or in the circulation department so far as ability was concerned. But I was taken on at a salary of twelve dollars per week, the editor and owner remarking as we closed the deal, 'I reckon you've got to live.'"

This was in the year 1891. He remained with the Indianapolis *News* during the next three years, but the work of this period left his reputation as a newspaper man very little enhanced. "I was not getting anywhere as a newspaper artist, but I was storing up a vast amount of theatrical knowledge, and incidently accumulating a fine assortment of canes and overgaiters," he writes with reference to his life during these years.

Severing his connection with the *News* in 1894, it was not until 1901 that he was again identified with that paper. In the meantime we find him in Chattanooga driving a mule team hitched tandem to a baking wagon, copying reprint for the Cincinnati *Tribune*, keeping gate for a summer amusement park at a salary of eleven dollars per week, and at work on the Mansfield (Ohio) *News*. He remained in this last position "quite a while," but there were grave objections to it. There was no chance to dress like an actor in Mansfield and, worse yet, the manager did not accept theater passes. Accordingly, Hubbard gave up the position and returned to Bellefontaine where he once more engaged in amateur theatricals.

There was naturally a feeling among his immediate relatives that a young man rapidly nearing thirty should have some visible and permanent means of support. Significant insinuations to this effect seem to have been, on occasion, uttered audibly. Kin quotes his brother as saying to him once when he was dressed in minstrel attire: "There you are all blacked up with your uniform and tambourine, but you can't do a thing. You can't dance and you can't sing and you're not funny." We are by no means certain that this criticism was just, for William Herschell, referring to an association with him at a somewhat later period, says: "A group of newspaper comrades at that time had a habit of meeting nightly in the northeast corner of the Dennison House. We called it the

'Amen Corner,' for few amens ever were said there because those fellows were jovial souls and none merrier than Kin Hubbard. His wit and his ability to imitate national figures, such as actors and politicians, kept us all in a roar."²

The criticism of the more practical brother, nevertheless, must have had the desired effect, for we find Kin accepting a position with the Indianapolis *Sun*, and remaining with this paper until he became re-identified with the *News* in 1901. "The salary was small," he explains, "but the theater passes were frequent, and I really made more progress as an artist during my two years on the *Sun* than I had in all the years before."

Three years after his return to the *News*, fortune began to smile upon him. How much of this was due to the woman in the case, we are unable to say, but we know that he was married to Josephine Jackson in 1905. The immediate occasion for his change of fortune was the presidential campaign of 1904. During this contest he accompanied the special trains of William Jennings Bryan and Charles W. Fairbanks on extended tours through Indiana. Concerning these trips and their immediate consequences he writes: "At the close of each day during those trips I made pictures of scenes and incidents and statesmen encountered on the tour and mailed them to the *News*. At the end of the campaign I had a surplus of material. My system was still full of things I had seen and heard, and I asked to be allowed to work off some of them after the election. I drew a character which I called Abe Martin, and for several days I wrote two connected but unrelated sentences bearing on politics and things in general, and published them beneath the picture. This caused some favorable comment, and it was decided to continue it." From time to time, new characters were introduced to say things that Abe was not likely to think about, and thus in due time appeared Tilford Moots, Lafe Bud, Constable Newt Plum, Gran'ma Pash, Tel Binkley, Fawn Lippincut, Dr. Mopps, Stew Nugent, Pinky Kerr, Tawney Apple, Ex-Editor Cale Fluhart, and a host of others—"veritable figures snatched bodily from the rural landscape," as Meredith Nicholson characterized them.

Success was spontaneous and immediate. "As the *News* readers got on to Abe," the humorist writes, "he grew in popu-

² Indianapolis *News*, January 26, 1930.

larity, and after a few months I could not have stopped him if I had wanted to." Some time later Hubbard introduced a new feature which he called "Short Furrows." This feature appeared weekly in the Saturday issues of the *News*, and in it the characters discussed "questions of deep and grave import" in a more extended and connected fashion than they were wont to do in the daily contributions of "Abe Martin." As his writing increased in popularity, it was syndicated to other journals until the time of his death, which occurred on December 26, 1930, it was appearing in more than three hundred newspapers and magazines. All this, together with books which he published annually containing the sayings of "Abe Martin," brought fame and fortune to the author.

Strangely enough, however, Hubbard was not known widely by his own name. So retiring and shy of publicity was he that millions to whom "Abe Martin" was a household word never knew the name of his creator. All this the humorist bore like the true philosopher that he was, and when asked whether he had not at some time been tempted to go to one of the big New York newspapers, replied: "Oh, I've had some flirtations occasionally. But I think I'm like a friend of mine whose uncle wanted him to go to Denver to take charge of a drug store. He said. 'I'd rather stay here where I'm known and can get in the band.' " In regard to being known, he is quoted as saying: "Even here in Indianapolis I often meet old acquaintances who ask me what I'm doing now, and scarcely a day passes that I'm not introduced to somebody who never heard of me. But I don't care," he added, "The world is full of people who don't even know who Tony Pastor was."⁸

"A kind of comical mixture of hoss-sense and no sense at all," was the manner in which Riley characterized Hubbard's humor. He observed society with an eye for incongruities, and made his sage observations through the medium of "Abe Martin" or through others of the numerous characters associated with the rural philosopher. He kept abreast of the times and remarked about things people were most likely to be thinking about at the particular moment. Politics, prohibition, the crime wave, farm problems, business depressions, prosperity, were subjects for numerous keen and penetrating remarks. Domestic relations, society, fashions, education, and similar

⁸ *American Magazine*, April, 1924. Reprinted in the *Indianapolis News*, January 26, 1930.

human interests were also objects of attention. At other times, he was content to make observations apropos of little or nothing in particular.

"Fawn Lippincut, loveliest of June brides, is home on a parole," he could announce innocently but significantly; or "Mrs. Art Purviance is vistin' her husband an' babies." Or again, "Artie Small has quit goin' with th' girls till he kin save enough t' marry one." And so on *ad infinitum*.

"Farming," he wrote, "is good exercise, an' when that's said, all's said." "A farmer," he declared, "is at the mercy of the elements, droughts, late springs, wet summers, early falls, hail, lightnin', frost, not to mention slumps." "At no time is he safe. Even when ever'thing is breakin' fine, the danger o' bein' gored by an angry bull is allus imminent." At another time, he remarked that "when we do see a nice, well-kept, prosperous-lookin' farm we find that it's the plaything o' some town plutocrat." This tendency, in fact, he saw manifested among the farmers themselves. As an example, he cited the case of Farmer Jake Bentley who had "accepted the janitorship o' Apple Grove Schoolhouse, an' will make agriculture a plaything." So great an encumbrance did the possession of land become that Abe found and repeated this bit of news: "Lile Tharp, whose father left him two farms, has petitioned t'have th' will set aside, declarin' his father must have been crazy." Approaching the problem from another point of view, he made this sly thrust: "Friends don't get you nothin'. Look at the farmer." All this is viewed as part and parcel of a more comprehensive situation. "About th' only thing we have left," he says, "that actually discriminates in favor o' th' plain people is th' stork."

"It's all right t' aspire to office, but when a feller begins t' perspire fer one it's time t' watch out." This choice piece of humor probably represented the author's own conviction in the field of politics. Although a partisan he did not desire office and rarely did he participate actively in a political contest.⁴ He was always interested, however, and in this connection we are favored with some of his best bits of humor. Attempting to explain the election of 1928, he called attention to what was the trouble, saying: "that indescribable somethin' or

⁴Indianapolis News, January 26, 1930. In the last years of his life he departed from his usual custom and served on the election board. In 1928 he managed the congressional campaign of Louis Ludlow.

other that us Democrats allus rely on to swing the election failed to show up." It was a mistake, moreover, to have gone after the farmer vote. "Farmers are Republicans fer th' same reason they're farmers." The trouble with them is "they don't stay mad long enough to scare either political party." And then there was gran'maw Bentley who died recently at the ripe age of 104. "She'd never seen a wheel chair until Al Smith ran fer the presidency." Nor was the election due to a lack of wets: "Ther's enough wets in this country t' elect three presidents, but ther's no party resourceful enough t' huddle 'em." And besides "why are only Democrats ever asked how wet they are?" In view of all this, President Hoover surely undertook a man's job in his attempt to make the country dry and the farmers happy at the same time.

In the realm of domestic matters the humor of Hubbard is irresistible: "The Kite divorce case was settled out o' court, Mrs. Kite agreein' to let Mr. Kite have all the children if he'd pay fer new brake linin's fer her car." Likewise the Larks are divorced but apparently on somewhat different grounds. "I never dreamed the marriage would stick," a woman remarked, "He's a good enough feller, but he doesn't know a thing about cookin.'" Beyond a doubt things may go to the other extreme: "I can allus tell a feller who has married a good housekeeper by the way he brightens up when I speak kindly to him." And again there is another possibility: "I knowed they lived comfortably but I didn't know he wuz rich," said Lafe Bud when he heard that Mrs. Tilford Moot's nephew was tired of his wife. On the other hand, Squire Marsh Mallow was of the opinion that "two-thirds o' th' couples who git a divorce still love one another, but hain't got the price t' put it over."

As to the relative deadliness of the two sexes he says: "When a husband gits tired of a wife he deserts her, but when a wife gits tired of a husband she murders him." He offers proof to corroborate this statement from a woman, who confided: "Oh, she'd have been rid o' him long ago, but he's got insomnia an' she can't ketch him asleep." It was a knowledge of this feminine trait that led the humoroist to conclude that "it's better to change your attitude an' pay heart balm than to be dug up later an' be analyzed."

Speaking of women's fashions, he says: "Figures don't

lie, but there's a lot of them on th' streets that look a little too open and above board." This, to be sure, has its advantage: "I used to think women wuz all alike, but now I can see ther's quite a difference in 'em." Elsewhere he speaks more specifically: "If you wanted a wife with lots of backbone, the past summer wuz th' time to pick her out." There was still another advantage: "A feller kin tell across the street whether he loves a girl or not, an' ther's no occasion or excuse fer long-drawn-out engagements. There she is, you kin see what you're gittin', take her or leave her alone." It's a poor rule, however, that won't work both ways. "You can't have a divorce, fer you could see what you wuz gittin' when you married her," roared Judge Pusey from the bench.

Nor is fashion confined to the clothes. Miss Tawney Apple has several positions in view if she can make the dimensions, and Mrs. Em Moots, having discarded black, offers to remodel to suit the right party. This is a condition, however, for which women are not wholly responsible: "Women never git th' benefit o' th' doubt. If they don't look good, they might as well be bad." The experience of Miss Lummie Kite is unique in this respect since "she's th' first stubby stout that's caught on here in three years."

The prohibition question Abe viewed dispassionately but with considerable amusement. He saw it, moreover, in all its ramifications. That there is such a thing as temperance is certain. Mrs. Joe Kite's brother is our authority. "In all th' years I've been in Washin'ton," he testifies, "I've never seen any lit up Siamese Twins." Striking at the heart of the enforcement question, the philosopher declares that "no community is dryer than its officials, an' that's rarely very dry." Nor is it particularly disconcerting to the bootlegger that only total abstainers are to be used in enforcing the law. "Jest because a feller don't drink is no sign he won't listen to reason." The trouble with the Volstead Act has generally been attributed to the teeth. Just the same "while they're X-rayin' th' teeth it won't hurt to examine th' eyes." "Ez Pash," to take an example, "has winked at th' dry law so long he looks like he was paralyzed on th' left side." Nor is the Hoover commission likely to help. "All that I kin git out o' the Wickersham position," Abe declared, near the end, "is that the distinguished

jurist seems t' feel that if we'd let 'em have it the problem o' keepin' 'em from gittin' it would be greatly simplified."

"Few things make us feel finer than havin' our judgment vindicated," is a fine example of scores of droll remarks that show the humorists' insight into human nature. He was especially adept in discovering manifestations of human vanities and he took delight in exposing them. Parodying Shakespeare, he soberly reflected that "some folks are born great, others achieve greatness, an' still others wear a wide braid on ther nose glasses." "The average important person" he saw as "just an ordinary human bein' reined up," and quoted Dr. Mopps as observing that "barely seven per cent o' people wearing large fierce lookin' shell rimmed glasses are really indispensable." Elsewhere he declared that "after many years o' th' closest observation, I'm more convinced than ever that th' louder a feller laughs at nothin' th' more pop'lar he is." He saw a real inconvenience, moreover, in over-reaching oneself, for "nothin' makes a feller round-shouldered quicker'n gittin' out of his class an' tryin' t' hold up his end." Frankness he liked: "As between th' feller that gits back at me an' th' feller that closes up like a clam, I'll take the former." Again he makes this revealing comment: "I like little children 'cause they tear out as soon as they git what they want."

And thus Frank McKinney Hubbard lived and made us laugh and see the truth. "The funniest guy in America", Will Rogers called him, and "as quaint and droll as Josh Billings and Artemus Ward ever dared to be" wrote George Ade with reference to the character, "Abe Martin."⁵ But Hubbard was more than funny. "He was a true humorist," says the Indianapolis *News* editorially, "and being a true humorist, was, as he must have been, a profound philosopher." As has been said of Mark Twain, he was different. Whether his sayings will provoke laughter in an age unfamiliar with the things he observed and wrote about, time only can tell. This much is certain. He understood his own age, and had the genius to mirror it in quaint phrasing, which not only amused the generation of which he was a part, but deeply instructed those keen enough to get his meaning. What more could be asked of a man?

⁵ *American Magazine*, May, 1910.