

## At the Sign of the Wooden Leg

By "Silas Wegg."

### Incomplete Predication.

"I love the old melodious definitions that softly melt the ages through." The rhythm of Euclid's enunciations beats with my pulse-beat even yet after years of absence from the blackboard. The music of Todhunter's Algebra for Beginners "comes o'er my ear like the sweet sound that breathes upon a bank of violets." The heart of that man is as black as Erebus who does not respond to the liquid melody of the old formula—"The product of the sum and difference of two numbers is equal to the difference to their squares." But there is one definition learned in my boyhood days that takes precedence of all others, not for its length or for its complexity, but because of its mouth-filling, imagination-haunting phraseology—"To be is a verb of incomplete predication."

Incomplete predication! Do you remember the day on which you first met this phrase, and the wonderment with which you met it? There was some pride, too, in your heart as you realized that you were entrusted with words like these. "Hippopotamus" and "Constantinople" were good jawbreakers to try on the fellows of the class below you, but here was something that would make the folks at the dinner-table sit up and take notice. Incomplete predication! You would have known a hippopotamus if you had seen it, and you had seen a wood-cut of Constantinople in the Geography. These were tough words but there was no magic in them. Their spell was broken, alas,

too often, at the spelling-bee. They were words of the material world. "Incomplete predication" belonged to the world of the spirit. This phrase was in the Grammar but you did not let that count against it. "The toad, ugly and venomous, wears yet a precious jewel in its head."

Incomplete predication! You are too old now to try to startle your neighbors with things like that. It is bad form, in fact, to use words of more than two syllables in conversation. Big words, like little children, should be seen and not heard. You may say them to yourself, however, on some lone shore or at midnight when the doughnuts and cheese rest heavily upon you. And it is well to remember that *to be* is a verb of incomplete predication even "at noonday, in the bustle of man's worktime."

I shun more than I shun any other creature the man who comes with the "final word." The final word should be distinguished from the last word. The man who gets the last word is a shrewd player who scores a goal. The man with the final word poses as the umpire, the supreme referee, whose decisions are not to be disputed. To say the last word demands merely skill or, sometimes, only wind, but to say, or to pretend to say, the final word demands nerve. The man with the final word scorns all ideas of incomplete predication. "I am Sir Oracle, and when I ope my lips let no dog bark." You know the fellow, don't you? He lets you have your say with too evident patience. He smiles