

The Comic Relief

By HARRIS MERTON LYON

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SAW old Blumentaub again tonight. He was sitting alongside the little news stand in Forty-second Street, gazing out at the lights and the hurrying crowds with an expression in his eyes which seemed anything but consolatory to conversation. Nevertheless, I spoke to him, asking him how everything went. He paid no attention to me for a moment; then, twirling his hat mechanically, he looked up for an instant, dropped his head, and said:

"Oh, just de same as it was."

I began to talk to him then, vaguely feeling that I ought to be, for the life of me, I could think of nothing to say. Even in the old days there had never been anything for us to talk about save the weather and the food on the table and—most of all—business, always business with Blumentaub. Money, bargains, the price of things, whatever—these were pretty much his elements of conversation. And I needed no eyes at all to see that he wanted none of those to-night. So I stood foolishly around in an aimless sort of way, my heavy boots tucked under my arm, my glasses held between the thumb and forefinger of one hand, feeling an embarrassment that belonged not especially to me, but rather to the condition of things around us both. Have you ever felt that way—say, when a calamity has occurred to a friend, that somehow you must act as if you felt generally responsible and were sorry you had let it occur? My tongue refused to be nimble, though, with the old man dumbly sitting there, and I remember to have come away at length, muttering, with a fresh attempt at bonhomie, that this was my throat:

"Well, just so it's no worse, you know."

But it was worse, and I knew it. His face was flushed with a little too much wine—or beer; perhaps it was beer. Blumentaub never used to drink too much in the old days; and he never used to frequent beer houses and free lunches—and this is why I suppose he drinks beer now—when we first met; let me see, that was over a year ago.

It is a hard sight to watch a man lose his grip. I tell you, but it is the hardest of all to see him lose it after fifty-five. It all seems so pitiless and relentless. Of course, there is some philosophy by which you can figure it all out impartially that old Blumentaub should come to this; there is always some nice, pat little way of accounting for all things. He looked ambivalent, you might say. Who doesn't at fifty-five? He should have foreseen his possible decline, should have laid in for a rainy day. And the wonder is, since he is a Jew, that he didn't do something of the sort.

The truth about Blumentaub is that he never was prepared, really prepared, for anything (the world is more than full of such people) and he would have been content to go on until the end of his days in his fifteen-dollar-a-week clerkship under his younger brother's hard-headed rule.

It is a simple story, lightly told. The younger brother had ambitious notions. In a week's time he made up his mind to call the wine shop, get all his money together, go west, and invest in real estate. To Blumentaub, fifteen years his senior, these rapid events were too bewildering. He did not comprehend them until the last day; and then only when his brother laid the fifteen dollars in his hand and remarked, in German:

"Well, this ends the old shop. You go down and see Stein. Maybe he'll put you to work."

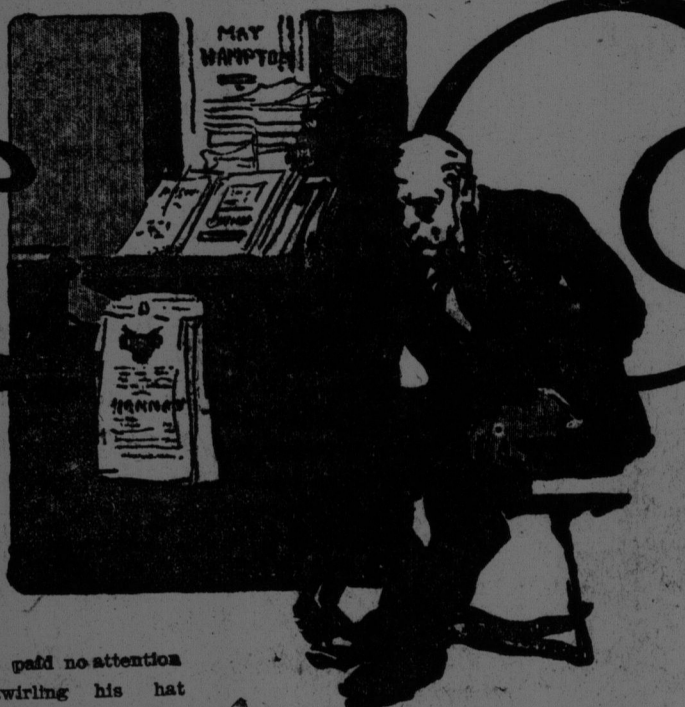
Sometimes the best way to tell a long story is to make it short. Well, then—Stein hadn't put him to work.

And now all the goodness of the thing comes back to me; it has grown on me, quietly, like the pathos of an old time, since it turned on my heel and walked home with my library books, leaving him there by the news stand in Forty-second Street, twirling his hat, looking at the lights, waiting alone, and half drunk.

I met Blumentaub at Galle's.

It was around on Fourth Street then, in among the tenements there. A rickety, greasy old basement doorway and a dark, stumbly hall let you in; in the back of the old Italian, in a lean-to shanty and a dismal yard, kept his long tables and his wine. Madison strove the rascal called it, to dodge the extortions and his license; and "The Dirty Speer" is what some chorus girl nicknamed it on a happy night.

Ruth and I had our little table a deux in those days, and I had my wine with a card tied round the bottle telling quarts consumed. There I first



met Ruthly, the shy little dark-haired pretty daughter; and Philomena, the buxom Genesee who waited on our table. I wonder if Ruth remembers the first night, when a gallant, white-haired old Frenchman cautioned her to save her knife and fork because she wouldn't be given another pair that meal?

It all happened so long ago, before we all became serious; it happened in a time before careers, I am sure. And only yesterday old Philomena said:

"Où est la mad'moiselle? No come?"

"No come no more, Philomena," I had to answer.

"Aw, she nice-a girl, yo' girl. She purty, p'tha. Yo' better git 'er back, m'sien; she nice-a girl."

"She's the sweetest girl that ever lived, Mena."

I said into my wine. And her black eyes snapped and she answered solemnly:

"Dat's a right, m'aise."

But Ruth has gone, as old Blumentaub has gone; and gone, too, is the white-headed Frenchman who shuffled down to his morning coat in dressing gown, slippers, and pipe. Only the old black cat stands stanchly by her post, delivering to earth cargo after cargo of little ebony kittens. Ebeul Rhodes! My outer ear now hears the rush of an L train; but my inner one—I think it vibrates to some one in the old days faintly singing:

Si vous venez avec moi—
Où, là, là! Où, là, là!

After Ruth left I moved over to the table of the grande famille. I was shy at first, conscious of my single forlornness and probably dwelling over former meals far more fondly than over these then upon my plate. Gradually, however, I became aware of a big, solid man upon my left who talked in an audience-compelling, prudent voice—not that the shout itself was marvellous, for every one of the family talked at once and all the time, with both hands in the air, eyes snapping fire, wrinkles unsmothered, with the conversational combat of the Romance tongue, but because now and then this Hercules gave to a round guttural German oath—and I am German.

I noticed the speaker more minutely. His build was that of a wrestler, but he used his muscles with the strip-halved indecision of old age; his hair was gray, and bald over the crown of his head; he ate voluminously and talked with early Teutonic aggressiveness, manifestly ill placed among the veiled French and Italians who surrounded him. Later I got his ear. "The wine is excellent," I said in his own tongue.

He beamed. "Ah, you speak German!" he cried, with the old enthusiasm of these people when they find another of their race. Somehow, to a Teuton it seems the wonder of wonders that anyone shall deliberately come into a foreign place possessed of a knowledge of the German language. "That is my wine. I mean, I sell it to Galle. It comes from California—hum—a pretty good red wine, as wines go. Now, you see, there are wines and wines. . . ."

The ice was broken. Blumentaub and I became cronies.

It went on that way a long, long time, and I got to know many twists and turns to the old man's nature in the course of it all, but that is not what I am thinking of to-night since I left him. I am not thinking of a man, nor a character, nor a condition.

I am thinking of a remark.

You know how, out of the great swirl of things heard, some little thing—perhaps it is happy, perhaps sardonic, perhaps innocent, perhaps sad—sticks in your memory foolishly while more important things slip carelessly by. You remember what Bolla said about a hat you wore four springs ago. I recall a friend's remark, made at college, that my voice grew nasal under stress of excitement. Somebody else said something trivial about cabs, or teeth, or geraniums.

None of these really mattered at all; yet here, after a year—nay, a half dozen years—we can

recall them almost by rote, while we cannot recollect the date of our mother's birthday! It is a queer phenomenon, almost proving that memory is a reverse process from what we imagine it to be, that memory is really a process of forgetting by elimination. Somehow I do not, I cannot, eliminate this remark about Blumentaub. It smote me in the heart to-night as I looked down upon his bowed head. . . .

"The comic relief!" How well I remember it! We were all sitting at the table that evening, joking as old neighbors will, dully enough, about each other, the food, the weather—anything. We had our own little circle, with Blumentaub as the bait of our remarks, and we always settled down to the meal before us with a sense of jovial familiarity. To anyone who has lived long in a family or a boarding house, explanation of this happy estate is unnecessary.

Darby, the stage carpenter, generally opened the rapid fire by referring to Blumentaub as "the best two-handed actor in the place." At this the old German always fired up and, what with food and

Hebraic, I say "injure!" because in our crowd the heavy wits were not apt to make nice distinctions in their fun, and what the jokers lacked in point they made up in Rabablistian vigor. I always used to help the old man on with his coat—in summer, if it was hot, he luxuriously went at his food in his shirt sleeves—or with his overcoat in winter; and it was just after I had performed this office for him, and had watched his best shoulders tossed lightly out by one of the circle:

"My, what would we do without old Blumentaub to poke fun at? Huh! He certainly is the comic relief around this joint!"

And so, just now it came back to me with a subtle pang, as I do certain things my mother said to me when I was a child. Why should it? Let me tell you.

I have guessed one secret of Blumentaub's life. He was lonely. He was lonely as only a Teuton can be who has lived to be fifty-five without getting married. You see, it is this way. Here is a race of men who cannot conceive an old age without caper clippers, red-faced children, a pipe, spectacles, and a good train keeping the place clean; to whom the boom of a family is as necessary as the boom of the earth; in whom heredity and environment, physical and emotional, have



"By Gosh, I ain't so old but vot I can vip the stuff's out o' you."

overemphasized the joys of a well-stocked home and a sedative old age. And here was Blumentaub unmarried.

I remember how pathetically he used to cling to me in the evenings, loath to let even my silent companionship go. I recall the little naive ways in which he tried to keep my attention for a whole hour, so that I didn't know if I was waiting studies and would refill my pipe with him. It must have been hard for him to beg me to stay; but it must have been compulsory.

"Why didn't you ever marry?" I asked him one night, when I'm afraid, my patience, and which is not Teutonic, had almost given out. And he told me.

It was all because of his mother. He had been engaged once, but the girl after waiting ten years had become tired. Why had he waited that long? Well, each of the other brothers had gone away from home and had married. So had the sisters

noticed until they were gone. And anyway, he—Blumentaub, the bald-headed old man—up till two years ago, when his mother died, had always been her "baby." He was her oldest son; somehow that is the one that mothers love the most, you see. The "baby" had stayed on in the old house with the eighty-year-old woman.

"You don't know vot it is," he said to me, emphasizing it solemnly with his pipe stem. "It try to move your mudder ven she's been all de ting in von place. You cannot do it. She want go live mit de brudders or sisters. She wants always de old home. Do you blame her? I ask you, do you blame her? No! You vat tell you git old yourself, my boy?"

So Blumentaub stayed on in the old house, waiting for his mother to die, and as he waited he grew older himself, more set in his ways, less amenable to the little things of life which were waiting for him outside. Little items like her cooking engrossed his attention. "I couldn't pay dot supper of hers anywere in New York for—two dollars!" he was wont to say afterwards. She became so feeble, in time, that she couldn't get out. He used to sit and read to her in the evenings. She darned his clothes and kept buttons on where they belonged. When she was alive, a suit used to last him five years.

Do all these things seem little and futile and silly and unworthy of comment? Perhaps they are; only, I am afraid you have never been a lonely German aged fifty-five, with only a bedroom up three flights of stairs in a cheap boarding house. "Vat, at last—you know how it is; we all got to die—my mudder she died. De brudders an' sisters all come to de funeral, yes. Ont den dey clear out again. I wait and wait in de ol' house, but I don't know vot to do vit myself. It is empty an' lonesome, like you know it must be after she's gone. I had to get my meals outside after a while, because even de ol' girl vot we had vent away. I come home at night an' de place was all still. Den you day all at vonce I realize vot's de matter, my boy. I am lonesome!" But Gosh, I am alone, all alone! Vy am I alone? I think of de ol' days an' de girl vot was waiting for me, and den I know—it is too late, I am too late! Everything is played out for me; I am old. Everything has gone on an' left me. I didn't know it till now, but it is true. I almost cry. It almost kills me. I am a back number, an' nobody cares; nobody cares about me, about vot happens to me—I am a back number." He held me roughly by the shoulder and his eyes glistened moistly.

"I make up my mind to leave de ol' place. Von of my brudders takes it, but I can't live in it. I vas her baby in dot ol' place, you see. Den I do a foolish ting. I go to live at a hotel, an'—as I s'emble in Vall Street. 'Vot do I know about Vall Street?' Nothing. Only I s'emble an' loose. Vy do I gamble? I don't know. I am an ol' fool. But I did it. An' after a while I don't got any more money.

"Den I go back to my brudder, my youngest brudder in de ol' house. An' he gives me a place to sleep. I pay him board. He gives me a chob in de wine shop, selling pin to siggars, for fifteen tollar a week. Do I like siggars? No. Do I like to sell stuff to men vot makes 'em drunk? No, it I had my money back I wouldn't do it—I know dot; but I gotta work.

"At last my brudder and his family moves away out into Brooklyn; an' I come here vit some people I know. Den dey raise de rent on me, an' I move here among dese ginnies. It is nice, heh? It is nice to live an' grow ol' an' have to do ting's you alone among people you don't know, ain't it?"

"You seem to be popular, though," I commented soothingly.

"Popular? Hah! Hah! Me popular, you say. How? By lettin' 'em poke fun at me, isn't it? Dey have der chok on me an' laugh. Is dot popularity? Yoss!"

In this manner, brokenly, he retold me his story—here, there, in patches. One night in the thick hot summer we took the ferryboat to Staten Island in order to get the breeze, and I recalled to him his early youth, when he had sailed up the bay, an immigrant from Bavaria.

One night, as a wedding went by, he told me again of the girl who had waited. But mostly, in the later days, he talked of money, of how successful his younger brother was, of how necessary money was to an old man in this world.

I wonder if a grim, sardonic Deily takes notice of these idle human things? I wonder if it is not with an actual pleasure that the screw is turned a little tighter upon those souls where the screw really needs a humane loosening? I am getting to the end of my story, my ill-written, hap-hazard sketch of a lonely old man on his way down the road of the world, and with all my books and my readings, I can only hide my face in my hands. For here is the bitter thing that haunted me as I left Blumentaub by the news stand to-night: I was upon the very Saturday evening that his brother had closed the wine shop and had turned the old man adrift; that the careless remark had been made behind Blumentaub's back:

"He certainly is the comic relief!"

As I feel it, that is the way the world spoils always—full of galls, callously, never seeing through to the pitiful truth beneath.

thing else regulates the little one's tender stomach, liver and bowels so effectually, besides their delectable love of delightful taste.

For constipated bowels, sluggish liver, biliousness, or sour, disordered stomach, feverishness, diarrhoea, sore throat, bad breath or to break a cold, give one-half to a teaspoonful of "Syrup of Figs," and in a few hours all the clogged-up waste, sourbile, undigested food and constipated matter will gently move on and out of the system without griping or nausea, and you will surely have a well, happy and smiling child again shortly.

With Syrup of Figs you are not druging your children, being composed entirely of luscious figs, senna and alicates that cannot be harmful.

Full directions for children of all ages and for grown-ups plainly printed on the package.

Ask your druggist for the full name.

"Syrup of Figs and Elixir of Senna," prepared by the California Fig Syrup Co., is the delicious tasting, genuine old reliable. Refuse anything else offered.

The Intercontinental Trains

Montreal, Oct. 17.—It has been decided that the Ocean Limited express on the intercontinental railway will be kept on the route between Montreal and Halifax, as a daily train, and that there will be no general change on the time as it is usual in October. The increasing traffic has made the step necessary.

The Maritime express will also be continued, thus making a double through train service. The Maritimes will leave Montreal daily, except Saturday, for points east of Campbellton, and daily for points west of Campbellton and Montreal.

So far no changes have been announced that affect local trains.

STOMACH SOUR? GOT INDIGESTION ALSO?

"Pape's Diapetsin" Will Make Your Disordered Stomach Feel Fine in Five Minutes. Time It!

If what you just ate is scouring on your stomach or has like a lump of lead, refusing to digest, or you have gas and cramps, sour, indigestion, or have a feeling of dizziness, heartburn, fullness, nausea, bad taste in mouth and stomach head—this is indigestion.

A full case of Pape's Diapetsin costs

only fifty cents and will thoroughly cure your out-of-order stomach, and leave you as healthy as a horse in case some one else in the family may suffer from stomach trouble or indigestion.

Ask your pharmacist to show you the formula plainly printed on these fifty-cent cases, then you will understand why Diapetsin troubles of all kinds must go, and why they usually relieve sour, out-of-order stomachs or indigestion in five minutes.

Diapetsin is harmless and tastes like candy, though each dose contains power sufficient to digest and prepare for assimilation into the blood all the food you eat; besides, it makes you go to the table with a healthy appetite; but, what will please you most, is that you will feel that your stomach and intestines are clean and fresh, and you will not need to resort to laxatives or liver pills for biliousness or constipation.

This city will have many Diapetsin

IMMIGRANT SWINDLED

New York Sharks Rob Englishman With Fake Story of Work for Him

Boston, Oct. 18.—Anthony Smith, who came to New York from London two weeks ago, as the latest victim of a cleverer game which has been used by New York swindlers for some time. He has told his story to the Boston police and

A HAPPY, LAUGHING CHILD IN FEW HOURS

If Cross, Irritable, Feverish, Tongue Coated and Sick, Give Delicious "Syrup of Figs"

Your child isn't naturally cross, irritable and peevish. Mother! Examine the tongue; if coated, it means the "little one's" stomach is disordered, liver inactive and its thirty feet of bowels clogged with foul, decaying waste.

Every mother realizes after giving delectable "Syrup of Figs" that this is the ideal laxative and physic for children. No-

investigation has been started.

According to the story, Smith was walking along one of the New York streets, looking for work, when he was met by a man who said he owned a hotel in Montreal and wanted an Englishman to work for "three pounds" a week. After Smith had accepted, the stranger took him to the depot, where a third man stepped up with a package and said to the bogus hotel owner:

"Here is the jewelry you ordered; \$230 could cash a check."

The "hotel proprietor" had only \$220 and borrowed \$10 from Smith, until he could cash a check.

He gave Smith the package and told him to go to a Boston hotel and there delivered the package to a Mr. Sykes, while he would arrive on a later train.

Magazine with tomorrow's Boston Sunday American.

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