

## ROUND THE TABLE.

Here is a little gem of word-painting from Carlyle's journal. It is winter of '34, and Carlyle has been reading Homer; his attention is drawn to that queer scene in the Council where Theristes makes too free with the godlike heroes, and his back pays the score.

"When Ulysses weals his back with that bang of the sceptre, how he sinks annihilated like a cracked bug! Mark, too, the sugar-loaf head, bald but for down, the shoulders drawn together over his back; a perfect beauty in his kind."

A grim kind of humour this of Carlyle, essentially characteristic of a ruder age. Quite incidentally in conversation it happened that reference was made to the Carlylean humour. It evoked the somewhat curious response—What! do you find any humor in Carlyle?—with a little laugh at the oddity of the notion. It might be worth investigating the conception of humour betrayed by such query. Probably it rises little above hearty appreciation of a pun, or the routine of funny paragraphs in comic papers. But observe how mechanical is this compounding of funnynisms. The effect aimed at is a mild shock produced by something unusual or forced in the turn of expression. Suppose that the phrase to be operated on is—"There is some sense in that." Keeping in mind the effect intended, it is at once evident that for "sense" an unexpected word must be substituted—all the better if somewhat undignified. Then, the innocent assertion, "there is some sense in that," appears in its funny dress as "there is *gum* in that." Or, again, let a politician at a public meeting declare that such or such is his unalterable opinion on some question of the day. The reporter for the other paper feels it his bounden duty to ridicule the speaker. The usual method is employed—a familiar phrase, totally unexpected however in this connection is inserted, and the desired result is brought about. "Mr. A. gave it as his unalterable *registered-for-transmission-abroad* opinion, etc., etc." Thus reads the translation into the funny dialect. This is all very well in its way, and clever enough too, but something radically different is needed to constitute humour. It is not enough that an idea be tricked up in fantastic garb—in itself such results in mere prettiness at best. The peculiar savor of humor must inhere in the idea. Quaintness in diction is one thing—another to grasp an idea in its fanciful relations, relations however that serve to throw into strong relief its pregnant verity; and herein it is that the humour of *Sartor Resartus* consists. Because so founded on the real that, like a flash, it lights up the dark corners of a subject, places the reader at a new point of view by, as it were, "depolarizing" the fixed phraseology that encumbers it. Humor in this sense is a deadly weapon against sham, however bulwarked by protecting formulas. This powerful engine did Carlyle possess and employ to good purpose against unverities impervious to argument.

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How few of us who are about University College day after day give what thought we should to the magnificence of design in its architecture, and the quaintness, the grotesqueness of detail! Have you ever come to it by moonlight, with the massive tower standing out above the sculptured portal, and the soft lines of light and shadow along the front,—with its pinnacles and gables and roofs, and all its lines and carvings bathed in that motionless silvery whiteness, like some perfect shape out of cloudland? Have you seen it under an autumn sunset? The sight would go far to gift one with an almost tremulous sense of the beautiful. Are you on familiar terms with each of the wide-mouthed, grinning heads and gargoyles set in the noble architecture like the quips and cranks in Shakespeare? Have you ever, except on hazing nights, gone down into the vaults to explore every corner? Have you stood in the vaulted chamber beneath the tower, straining your eyes to see something more than visible darkness "by the dim, religious light" of a match? Do you yet know,—or could you wish to know,—the edifice stone by stone, carving by carving? Have you found meanings in all this beauty of architecture? The two blindworms carved in stone, for example, one on either side the steps leading to the main entrance, are symbolical of the slow, painful strugglings up from the depths and darkness into the light of knowledge. Did you know of this before? Have you read what William Black has written of our University in *Green Pastures and Piccadilly*? Do you—but I pause for breath.

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These rhetorical questions you will answer to yourself as best may please you. If it be that any third person,—not you or I,—looks on them as fatuous, senseless queries, pranked out in an affected mode, let him pray that it may yet be given him to gather to himself some of the wisdom beyond price which knows how to come upon

"Tongues in trees, wisdom in running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

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A politician is constantly on thorns lest he be inconsistent with

previous utterances. In fact, consistency is the choicest jewel in the crown of political virtues. Honour and honesty the politician may have, but consistency is imperative. Consistency, however, is not the peculiar virtue of politicians; all manner of men sacrifice at her altar: in effect, wish it to be thought that their minds are well-balanced and trustworthy. All this savours of egotism. Pray, sir, who are you, anyway, that it concerns this busy world to reflect whether you have always thought as now? Of course, it is safe to predict that to-morrow one will think two and two make four, and so on. It is equally safe to presume that the general rules of conduct that have become part and parcel of our existence will still seem necessary and valid. But why seek to carry mathematical certainty into the realm of taste and judgment? What a dreary, monotonous existence this of ours would be if we could see before us in this way our mental furniture always the same. How tiresome it would be to be always knocking against the same old idea, like a machine, regularly, on due occasion, going through the same motions. Where, then, is there room for mental growth and expansion if, because we have once regarded such and such a standard as final, we are not permitted to change? Let us not be quite so consistent; rather should it be faced as a symptom of mental stagnation if your opinions on matters of judgment have not undergone some distinct, though it may be slight, modification. For if so, certain it is that either no further data have been found or that you are gifted with marvellous prescience. All of us who have been *boys* (some of us seem to have missed this stage of development) will remember a curious operation of which the subject used to be a hen. Take a staid old hen, whose youthful levity has disappeared under the cares of the world; with your hand press her beak to the ground, and draw with a lump of chalk a line straight from the tip thereof. Remove all restraint, and the deluded fowl remains in that position as if fascinated, steadily glaring at that line. This exactly represents the attitude of the man who boasts his consistency. By some means placed at one point of view of a subject, there he sticks, it being impossible to put him in possession of a different one, and thereby enlarge his mental experience. Let us not be quite so consistent.

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A correspondent asks what is the sanctioned usage in the matter of spelling the name of the greatest of dramatists and poets. An exhaustive essay on this subject will be found in Elze's book on Shakespeare, in the Library,—one might term the essay exhausting, were it not that nothing can be tedious which treats of Shakespeare. From records, documents, the parish registers of Stratford town, and what other sources are to be got at, it has been found that the name is spelt very variously, as might indeed be expected in an age when orthography was still a matter of private opinion. It would seem that the true spelling is either Shakespeare or Shakspeare. The last needs explanation. When the immortal William came to be a man about town, he grew half ashamed of the homely name his forbears, stalwart Warwickshire yeomen, had left him. Names which have a specific matter-of-fact meaning cannot take on the nameless magic of courtly ease—even though when done into Latin they have the fine sonorous quality of *Hastivibrans*; for so did a poet of his own day name him. Elze has some interesting remarks on this frivolous fashion of the day, which is with us still in the person of Mr. J. Banclerque Smythe. Shakspeare may well be forgiven this trifling vanity, if it fits us, whose minds and souls would be lost in that noble, godlike man's, to speak so of him; and I will own that I take a simple, foolish pleasure in writing his name as he would have it written in the hey-day of his London success.

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We had been talking of Tennyson's "Break, break, break," and the ingenious man, who was sitting near the fire, in the broken arm-chair, repeated the verses slowly:

"Break, break, break,  
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!  
And I would that my tongue could utter  
The thoughts that arise in me.

"O well for the fisherman's boy,  
That he shouts with his sister at play!  
O well for the sailor lad,  
That he sings in his boat on the bay!"

"Do you know," he said, "what the finest thing about these lines is,—the something which haunts you with its hinted pathetic grace? It must be sought for deeply. The initial letters of the first stanza are *b-o-a-t*! What superb 'local coloring' in a sea-piece! Ah, Tennyson is indeed a great poet!"

This, you must know, was sarcasm on the part of the ingenious man; for he had in his mind at the time certain critical Boeotians, with perceptions no blunter than the large end of an egg, who do analyze most deftly the spell under which the poets hold us.

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