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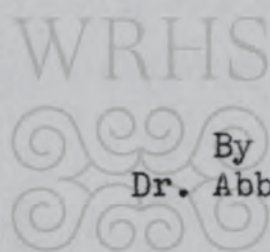
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The humorist faces death, 1944.

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A HUMORIST FACES DEATH

The Valedictory of Irvin S. Cobb



By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver



At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, March 26, 1944

A few weeks ago the well known American humorist, Irvin S. Cobb, died at the age of 67. His name was a household word among the American people. He was greatly enjoyed and loved by an entire generation of Americans who read with keen delight his generous outpourings of wit and drollery. He belonged to that characteristic American galaxy of American humorists -- Will Rogers, Dooley, Mark Twain -- who laughed at life without malice, who exposed human foibles without bitterness and who brought the saving grace of a penetrating but kindly wit to play upon our national life. These men belonged to a school of wise homespun philosophers who illumined life by the rich gaiety of their spirits and who helped to correct men's perspective upon themselves not by denouncing them but by inviting them to laugh at themselves.

Mr. Cobb himself defined his own technique. He regarded humorous writing as he put it, as about the most serious work a writing man can do. That, of course, is very true. As someone said long ago: "Humor is gravity concealed behind the jest."

"He had two rules in writing humor. The first was to try to avoid giving offense to any individual. The other was, as he expressed it, to seek, between the lines, to say to a reader: 'Listen, old man, I'm about to poke fun at some of the foolish things you have done and said, but understand, please, that no matter how foolish you may have been in your time, I'm a bigger ass than you ever can hope to be. We're both in the same boat, so bear with me while I make confession for the two of us.'" And that is a rather good technique for a humorist. His was a form of waggish humanism and whimsical homiletics.

Irvin S. Cobb wanted his death to be like his life -- cheerful. Two years ago he wrote a sort of running commentary, a sort of biography which he called "Exit Laughing". He wishes to close his life on the same note on which he lived and be consistent to life in death.

So that a few weeks ago, before his death, he wrote a 1500 word letter to his friends in which he gave detailed instructions as to the kind of funeral and burial he wanted. He spiced his letter with many quips with shrewed and wily comments and jewels of wisdom in unsuspected packages.

The man's admonition as regards his funeral is "to keep the thing cheerful". No black crepe, no mourning habilments, no show of grief at his funeral. He wanted a plain burial. He wanted to be wrapped up in a plain sheet or cloth. He didn't want to be "hecked out in one of those dismal numbers run up by the undertakers dressmaking establishment." He does not want to make his exit in a tailcoat with white tie and artificial pearl studs." He wants no one to look upon his faith in death.

One is reminded of the great Saladin. He, too, left instructions for his death -- that there be no solemnity attached to his funeral, that a humble priest take his shirt and affix it to a lance and walk before him and say: "The great Saladin ~~is~~ who conquered the whole East has nothing at death but his shirt."

Not all people feel like Saladin or like Irvin Cobb. How often you and I have seen people all dressed up in a coffin ~~and~~ reclining in a very expensive casket which cost more money than they ever gave to charity, lying and waiting to be admired, waiting to have people say: "How well they look". Irvin Cobb wanted to be wrapped up in a plain sheet, naked and his ashes placed in an inexpensive canister. And he wanted no flowers. He preferred that people give their money to some charity. How often you and I have seen funeral homes converted into florists shops and the deceased embowered in a cluttered up world of multi-colored and variously sized harps, lyres and lutes, floating-angels and cherubim, baskets, blankets, boxes, pots and hampers, all beribboned and beloganed, and and I you/wondered whether the dead man was really so fond of flowers, and why he had to wait so long to get them.

Irvin Cobb wants his ashes taken to his home town, Paducah, and "at the proper planting season a hole shall be dug in our family ~~at~~.. and a dogwood tree planted there and the ashes strewn in the hole to fertilize the tree roots. Should the tree live that will be monument enough for me." Let them cover the spot with leaves or berries or leafy boughs from his beloved native countryside.

He wants no pallbearers. Those of his friends who want to go along for the ride are welcome. He invites his old-time friends by name. Ladies are welcome with or without escorts.

He doesn't want a so-called Christian burial, service to be read at his funeral. He regards it "as one of the most cruel and paganish things inherited by our forbears from our remote pagan ancestors." But in deference to his mother who was a faithful communicant of the Presbyterian Church, he requests that the Pastor be invited and be requested to read at his funeral the 23rd Psalm which was his and his mother's favorite passage from the Scriptures "since it contains no charnal words, no morbid mouthings about corruption and decay." For the wind-up of the services he would be grateful to some of his colored friends to sing "Swing low, Sweet Chariot" and "Deep River."

He wants no monument upon his grave. "Should the tree live, that will be monument enough for me." "But should my surviving relatives desire to mark the spot further, I make so bold as to suggest that they use either a slab of plain Kentucky limestone set flat in the kind earth or a rugged natural boulder of Southern granite bearing a small bronze plate with my name on it and, if it seems pertinent, the year of my birth and the year of my death, which appears to be the custom, although I could never understand why a gravestone should carry mention of the only two events in th career of the deceased with which he had absolutely nothing to do."

And "also on the bronze tablet or the stone slab, as the case may be, and provided it doesn't cost too much, I'd like to have inscribed certain lines from the epitaph

which Robert Louis Stevenson wrote for himself, to wit:

"This be the verse you grave for me:
"Here he lies where he longed to be;
"Home is the sailor, home from the sea,
"And the hunter home from the hill."

"Or, if a simpler single line bearing the same imprint seems desirable, I offer this one as suitable: 'I have come back home.'"

That is how Irvin S. Cobb regards death. To return to his native elements and have his ashes vertilize the tree-roots and so to return to the eternal stream of life. That is how he looks upon death, life which is transformed and un-ending, changing but never corrupt or decayed.

This was his faith. And it seemed to have brought gladness to him. This what enabled him to be able to say on his death: "Keep the thing cheerful."

"For here is where he longed to be", at home in the bosom of the everlasting -- the earth, the soil, the skies and winds and rains. He was a part of it, of its essential substance, of its indestructibility, of its enduring existence.

Judging by his letter and by his book, "Exit Laughing", Irvin S. Cobb was not an orthodox religious man. He belonged to no church. He had a religion, but without creed and dogma. He was not greatly impressed by much that he found in orthodox denominations about him. Some of the orthodox theologies spoke of Hell and Heaven. The reason why he loved the 23rd Psalm so much because it is "mercifully without creed or dogma, carries no threat of eternal hell fire for those parties we do not like, no direct promise of a heaven which, if one may judge by the people who are surest of going there, must be a powerfully dull place, populated to a considerable and uncomfortable degree by prigs, time-servers and unpleasantly aggressive individuals. Hell may have a worse climate but undoubtedly the company is sprightlier."

Irvin Cobb evidently had not thought through his religious position, nor had he clearly devined its concepts. There was something in every religion which appealed to him. He was hoping for a kind of synthetic religion to which he could subscribe. In his letter he describes what he would term an ideal religion if he

had one.

"As an aside I might add that my notion of an ideal religion would combine the with dignity and the beauty of the Romanist ritual/certain other ingredients; the good and the ability taste/of the Unitarians and Episcopalians -- a trait not too common to some of the evangelical groups -- to mind their own business. I'm proud that I never set myself up to be my brother's keeper, having been sufficiently occupied by the job of being my own keeper. To these add the noble ethics and the splendid tolerance expressed in reformed Judaism; the study of independence and the good business principles of the Mormons; the gentle humility and ordered humanity of the Quakers, plus the militant zeal and unselfish devotion of those shock troops of the Lord -- the Salvation Army, who fight in the trenches of sin's no-man's land to reclaim the tortured souls and clothe the naked bodies of those whom the rest of a snobbish world forgot.

"If, based on this combination, there was a determination to practice the sectless preachments and the teachings of Jesus Christ, who was the first true gentleman of recorded history and the greatest gentleman that ever lived, I might not have joined the fold, but certainly I'd have stood on the side lines and cheered for it."

And there is his ideal religion. But the difficulty with it of course is the same difficulty you have when you try to make a composite picture of human beings. You get no picture at all. You get a super-imposed picture of one on top of another, a blur, indistinguishable, distorted, unreal picture of the man.

To be a real directive in one's life, religion must possess certain consistencies in thought and a corresponding outer expression in form, discipline and ritual. What attracted Mr. Cobb to the specified qualities of each religion are not incidental and cannot be abstracted from their full life and history. It is as well to wish for a single flower that will combine the stateliness of a lily, the fragrance of a rose, the modesty of a violet, the dignity and beauty of a chrysanthemum. It just cannot be done. Every flower is unique unto itself and

possessed of inner meaning of its own.

There is an essential and unique genius in each great, historic religion which escapes the seeker after the electric and the selective, and which completely satisfies the men who steep themselves in them.

I was intrigued by the manner in which Mr. Cobb describes the Master of Christianity -- as a true gentleman -- a rather intriguing and original epithet. What does he mean by it? I went to his book, "Exit Laughing", where he has similar thoughts expressed, and I found that what makes him describe Jesus as the "first gentleman of history" are his qualities of humility, humanity, utter lack of snobbishness, his thoughtful consideration for his fellow beings, compassion for their weaknesses and forgiveness for their sins, his graciousness and gentleness, dignity and courage, simplicity, his regard for duty." All of which is true. But those qualities are not unique to Jesus. You find them in many other great founders of religion, teachers of mankind. You find the same qualities in Abraham, Moses, Buddah, Confucius. If one reads the New Testament one realizes that Jesus experienced anger, indignation. He found himself criticising, cursing the evil-doers and threatening them with hell fire. He drove the money-changers out of the Temple. One finds qualities in this great religious leader that are not always those of the tender, gentleman Jesus. But here Mr. Cobb would like to be selective and unrealistic.

And because in an uncritical manner he has idealized the founder of Christianity, he proceeds equally unrealistically to pour fire and brimstone upon the vengeful, bloody-minded Jehovah of the Old Testament.

"By the way, have you ever noticed that in time of war not the most passionate partisan dares to ask the Prince of Peace to bless his bloody arms and forward his bloody deeds? He invokes the aid of the god of unjustified battles as created by the ancient Hebrews.

"All Hitler needed to do was to let his whiskers sprout and sit on a nest of thunderbolts and naked swords, thinking of plague and pestilence and rapine and slaughter and slavery for the vanquished, to be a fit understudy for the vengeful, murderous Jehovah of the forepart of the Old Testament."

Now what Mr. Cobb meant by the forepart he doesn't specify. What special books he did not approve of, which represented this god as the murderous god Jehovah, he does not say. Surely he could not have referred to the first five books of Moses. For God is spoken of as in the ten commandments, showing mercy to thousands who love me. Surely it could not have been the God of the Book of Exodus, the Lord God of mercy and compassion, great patience, full of kindness. Surely it could not have been the God of the book of Leviticus, who ordained man to leave a corner of his field to the poor and the widow, who said do no injustice, not to hate your neighbor: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, for I am the Lord. I wonder just exactly what he did have in mind. I wonder whether he had repeated something which he was taught as a child in Sunday School.

There is a sharp contrast of the God of the Old Testament with the God of the New Testament dating back to the second century B.C.E., when one of the early Christians made an unreal contrast and described the God of the Old Testament as a "stern, jealous, wrathful God, who exacts blind obedience, fear. There is absolutely nothing to it. The God of Judaism is a God of justice and the God of love, and these are not irreconcilable. God is a just God. Life must be built on a foundation of justice. God punishes, but not in vengeance, but in order to correct, to set men right. And always there is a quality of Tshuvah -- penitance, to start afresh with forgiveness.

But then Cobb was no careful student of Judaism or Christianity, and we shall not quarrel with him. He meant well. His heart was full of human kindness. He was tolerant, open hearted. He was generous. I would say his example of all humor is sensible, warm, tender. This fine American humorist had that warm tender fellow-

feeling with all forms, organic, or inorganic...

He thought that perhaps some of his fellow towns-people might want to have some memorial services and so he took care of that too. He says: "I rather figure some of my fellow townspeople might favor memorial exercises of sorts, either in connection with the funeral or elsewhere. Personally, I have no objection, only desiring that no dismal note be permitted to ooze into the proceedings. Keep the thing cheerful, boys and girls. If somebody feels called upon to speak, I'd like to suggest for the job -- well, say Tom Waller. He could be depended upon to be neither verbose nor lachrymose. Or, if Waller isn't available, there's Jack Fisher or Jim Wheeler or Roy Shelbourne. Only make it snappy.

"Well, I reckon that will be about all, except that I extend, in passing, my affectionate and grateful regards to the gracious and generous folks who make up so overwhelmingly the dwellers in my home community and my native section. You've been mighty good to me and I appreciate it. Much obliged, you all, and goodbye and bless you and prosper you."

And I suppose that is perhaps the best way to take our departure from this good kindly and humorous man ^{who} ~~the~~ eased the burdens of many people by making them laugh. Perhaps it is a good way to take our departure from other peoples, about to leave to say: "You've been might good to me and I appreciate it. Much obliged, you all, and goodbye and bless you and prosper you."

no cramer words, no morbid mouthings about corruption and decay. **A** being mercifully without creed or dogma, carries no threat of eternal hell fire for those parties we do not like, no direct promise of a heaven which, if one may judge by the people who are surest of going there, must be a powerfully dull place, populated to a considerable and uncomfortable degree by prigs, time-servers and unpleasantly aggressive individuals. Hell may have a worse climate but undoubtedly the company is sprightlier.

The Catholics, with their genius for stage-management, handle this detail better. The officiating clergyman speaks in Latin and the parishioners, being unacquainted with that language, are impressed by the mystery and the majesty of the rolling, sonorous periods without being shocked by distressing allusions and harrowing references.

B Describes "Ideal Religion"

As an aside I might add that my notion of an ideal religion would combine the dignity and the beauty of the Romanist ritual with certain other ingredients; the good taste and the ability of the Unitarians and Episcopalians—a trait not too common to some of the evangelical groups—to mind their own business. I'm proud

that I never set myself up to be my brother's keeper, having been sufficiently occupied by the job of being my own keeper. To these add the noble ethics and the splendid tolerance expressed in reformed Judaism; the study of independence and the good business principles of the Mormons; the gentle humility and ordered humanity of the Quakers, plus the militant zeal and unselfish devotion of those shock troops of the Lord—the Salvation Army, who fight in the trenches of sin's no-man's land to reclaim the tortured souls and clothe the naked bodies of those whom the rest of a snob-bish world forgot.

If, based on this combination, there was a determination to practice the sectless preachments and the teachings of Jesus Christ, who was the first true gentleman of recorded history and the greatest gentleman that ever lived, I might not have joined the fold, but certainly I'd have stood on the side lines and cheered for it. —

C By the way, have you ever noticed that in time of war not the most passionate partisan dares to ask the Prince of Peace to bless his bloody arms and forward his bloody deeds? He invokes the aid of the god of unjustified battles as created by the ancient Hebrews.

All Hitler needed to do was to let his whiskers sprout and sit on a nest of thunderbolts and naked swords, thinking of plague and pestilence and rapine and slaughter and slavery for the vanquished, to be a fit understudy for the vengeful, murderous Jehovah of the forepart of the Old Testament.

come with or without escorts.

I rather figure some of my fellow townspeople might favor memorial exercises of sorts, either in connection with the funeral or elsewhere. Personally, I have no objection, only desiring that no dismal note be permitted to ooze into the proceedings. Keep the thing cheerful, boys and girls. If somebody feels called upon to speak, I'd like to suggest for the job—well, say, Tom Waller. He could be depended upon to be neither verbose nor lachrymose. Or, if Waller isn't available, there's Jack Fisher or Jim Wheeler or Roy Shelbourne. Only make it snappy.

Well, I reckon that will be about all, except that I extend, in passing, my affectionate and grateful regards to the gracious and generous folks who make up so overwhelmingly the dwellers in my home community and my native section. You've been mighty good to me and I appreciate it. Much obliged, you all, and goodbye and bless you and prosper you.

IRVIN S. COBB.

At New York, Dec., 1943.

others have, occasionally, but I haven't."

He had two rules in writing humor. The first was to try to avoid giving offense to any individual. The other was, as he expressed it, to seek, between the lines, to say to a reader: "Listen, old man, I'm about to poke fun at some of the foolish things you have done and said, but understand, please, that no matter how foolish you may have been in your time I'm a bigger ass than you ever can hope to be. We're both in the same boat, so bear with me while I make confession for the two of us."

In Hollywood Mr. Gobb's first star role was as Captain Eli in

But should my surviving relatives desire to mark the spot further, I make so bold as to suggest that they use either a slab of plain Kentucky limestone set flat in the kind earth or a rugged natural boulder of Southern granite bearing a small bronze plate with my name on it and, if it seems pertinent, the year of my birth and the year of my death, which appears to be the custom, although I could never understand why a gravestone should carry mention of the only two events in the career of the deceased with which he had absolutely nothing to do—unless he committed suicide.

Also on the bronze tablet or the stone slab, as the case may be, and provided it doesn't cost too much, I'd like to have inscribed certain lines from the epitaph which Robert Louis Stevenson wrote for himself, to wit, as follows:

"These be the lines you 'grave for me,

Here I lie where I long to be.

Home is the hunter, home from the hill,

And the sailor home from the sea."

I'm quoting from memory. If I'm wrong will somebody kindly correct me?

[Mr. Cobb's quotation was in error. The lines from "Requiem," written by Stevenson and engraved on his tombstone, follow:

"This be the verse you grave for me:

Here he lies where he longed to be;

Home is the sailor, home from the sea,

And the hunter home from the hill."]

Or, if a simpler single line bearing the same imprint seems desirable, I offer this one as suitable:

"I have come back home."

He Bans Flowers

4) The main administration as regards his funeral is to keep the thing cheerful. He wants no long faces - no black-cups - no mourning habilements, no show of grief at his funeral. - He wanted a plain burial, to be wrapped up in a plain sheet or cloth and to be cremated.

- He doesn't want to be decked out in "an, then ~~disposal~~ ^{disposal} numbers run up by the undertaker's dressmaking establishment." He does not want to make his exit in a tail-coat with white tie and orthopedic pearl studs. He wants us on to look upon his face in death -

Sabbath
no Sabbath
Shant - how
- funeral
curtain!
East

How often I see people all dressed up in a coffin and no place to go to. - reclining in an expensive casket that ~~cost~~ ^{represents} more money than they ^{are} gave to charity, ~~in all their life~~ ^{waiting, and it were to be spent} - "how will they ~~live~~ ^{live}?"

- Irvin Cobb asked that, how often he placed in an unperfumed container - "nothing fancy there, please"

- He wants no flowers. He would prefer that they give the money to some local charity.

- How often have you seen funeral homes transpended with florist shops - with and the deceased embowed in a world of multi-colored + variegated - rigid horse-shoes, hanks, ^{types & letters} floating - angels, & cherubins, baskets, boxes, spots & banners - all beis blooded & bespangled and you wondering whether the dead man was really so fond of flowers, and why he had to want so long to get them.

5/ Irvin Cook wants his ashes taken to his home town and "at ⁽³⁾
the proper planting season a hole shall be dug in our family
lot.. and a dogwood tree planted there and the ashes strewn
in the hole to fertilize the tree roots. Should the tree
live that will be monument enough for me". Let them
cover the spot with leaves - or berries or leafy boughs.
from his beloved native countryside.

6/ He wants no pall-bearers - Those, his friends who want
to "go along for the ride" are welcome. He invites his old-
time friends by name. Ladies are welcome with or without
escorts.

7/ He ^{does not} want ^{the so-called} ~~no~~ Christian burial service read at his funeral.
He regards it "as one of the most cruel and paganish things
inherited by our fathers from our remote pagan ancestors"

(a) In deference - mother - ^{request} ~~current pastor~~; the Pres. Church
to read the 23rd Psalm. - "his other favorite passage in
the Scriptures: 'since it contains no charnel words, no
morbid mouthings about corruption and decay, and
being mercifully without creed or dogma, causes no
thought of eternal hell for those parties we do not
belong to.' For the wind-up - he'd be grateful if some of his
colored friends say "hush low, sweet chant" & the "Deep Throat"

8/ He wants no monument. Should the tree live...
Should surviving relatives desire to mark the spot
suggests either (Irvin). And on tablet or stone slab (Irvin)

9. "I have come back home." That is how he regards death. (4)
To return to our native elements — and by our
ashes or dead bones to fertilize the true ~~the~~ roots — and
so to return to the ~~stream~~ ^{stream} of life ~~life~~ ^{again} ~~life~~ ^{life} ~~chambered~~
but unending — changing but never corrupt or decayed
— This was his faith — and it brought gladness to him —
"Keep the thing cheerful" "For here is where he layed
to be" — at home in the bosom of everlasting being

10. He was not an orthodox ^{he belonged to no church} ~~rel.~~ man. He had a religion —
without creed or dogma. He was not impressed by
the orthodox theories which spoke of Hell and Heaven;
He loved the 23rd psalm because (Just) (A)

11. ~~This ideal religion~~ Had not that then his rel. position:
clearly defined his concepts. ~~He seemed~~ ~~what~~ there was
something in almost every rel. which appealed to him.
~~He~~ A sort of synthetic religion, wrought rescued to (Just) (B)

① Diffusely — composite picture — no picture at all —
blurred — vague — distorted — and unreal.

② To be a direction in life — a rel. must possess a
certain coherence of that and a corresponding outer
expression in form, discipline & ritual. What attracts
Mr. Cobb to the specific qualities of each religion, are
not incidental — cannot be abstracted from their full

life and history. It is as well to wish for a single
(flower) that will ~~have~~ ^{combine} the stateliness of a lily, the fragrance
of a rose, the modesty of a violet, the color,
majesty, dignity & beauty of a chrysanthemum. etc.

③ There is an essential & unique power in each
great, historic religion, which escapes the seeker after
the selective & the selective. and which completely satisfies
those who sleep in them.

14. Lewis S. Cobb - calls Jesus - "the first true gentleman" &
recorded his life & the greatest gentleman that ever lived"
- an original and inspiring effort that to apply to Jesus
- what does he mean: "Exit laughing" - humility, humanity
utter lack of nobility - that full consideration for fellow
beings, compassion for their weaknesses & sufferings &
their mis- judgments & gentleness, chamberlains,
dependant & courage, simplicity & regard for duty"
- True! But not unique to Jesus. ^{Abraham, Moses, Krishna} There were then
the only qualities. He also experienced anger, indignation -
He denounced - criticized - he cursed the evil
doers, the hypocrites, he threatened them with hell-fire
and the eternal burning of teeth. - Drove the
money-changers out of the Temple

Here, too, Mr. Cobb would like to be selective for!
unrealistic

13/ ~~Egypt~~ and because in an uncritical manner, he has idealized the founder, Christ - he forces equally uncritically to join his ~~followers~~ upon the bespoken, bloody-armed Jehovah, the O.T. ~~(the)~~ (Just C)

(a) ~~He~~ He limits his criticism to the Jehovah, the "prophet", the O.T.? What part did he mean? ~~the~~ ~~the Bible often - of Christ - selected passages - "an un-~~
~~approachable budget of creative power" - But it is the first~~
~~piece of fiction in all literature. But evidently with~~
The 5 books, Moses? Exodus 1: 1-30: 11 = 10 commandments

(2) A stranger than what we know - we oppress him. 10

(3) ~~plm 1/1 2 2~~, Leviticus ① half hearted - defend -
even a deaf person. do no in justice. hate your brother ~~with~~
~~But~~ God, Prophets - ~~And 1/1 3/1 1/1 1/1 1/1~~

(b) Marcus - 2 c. - compare God of O.T. with God
of Gospel. "Stern, jealous, wrathful God
who expects blind obedience, fear,

- God of Love -

(c) Nothing to it. Further + Love - ~~not~~ ^{not} ~~unmemorable~~ ^{unmemorable} ~~autogrowth~~

2 aspects (same reality). - to correct - not in response

God is just - rewards - punishes & Repentance.

"God doth not willingly afflict his children"

13). But then ^{careful} ~~Colby~~ was no Student of Jordanis or Chastity (7).
He went by ^{honesty} impressions and popular opinion - Not grained
- But he meant well. His heart was sound.

- Human Kindness - Tolerant - generous - open hearted
- Humoral service - back home - (Just)
"Good-bye and bless you"

"Essever / all
humor is
sensibility
warm tender
fellow-feeling
with all forms
of existence"
- Carlyle

